

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



WORLD STUDY: A SUMERIAN MYSTERY

TEACHERS' NOTES

The Sumerian mystery, lasting three lessons, was taught to a combined class of children aged 9–11 in a small rural primary school.

The resource for the lesson was a description of what people found in one of the royal tombs of Ur which dated from about 4000 years ago. (This was in ancient Mesopotamia, near what we now call the Persian Gulf.) The story is full of the magic and mystery of the past, old gods and burial ceremonies, belief in an afterlife, and mystifying objects.

Teaching methods used were storytelling and expressive movement. Both methods offer ways of teaching history with the human element strongly present.

Storytelling provides children with mental pictures and information about past situations; and expressive movement requires them to make a real effort to think and feel their way into such situations, and to express their understanding enactively, through frames (tableaux).

The lessons needed thorough preparation to be successful, but then this is true of most good teaching.

Year group/class

Combined Year 5 and 6 class of 29 pupils, mixed gender and ability.

Teaching time

Three lessons, totalling approximately 2.5 hours.

Learning objectives

To use expressive movement to:

- develop the children's sympathy with a mystery of the past in such a way that they begin to understand the beliefs and behaviour of the people involved
- put the children into a situation where they will react in ways that are consistent with the historical information that survives
- gain an understanding of what might have been the sequence of events when a king of Ur died
- gain an insight into the importance of religious myths in Sumerian society.

Key questions

- How might we explain what was found in a royal tomb of Ur, using expressive movement?

Resources

The story of the finding of a royal tomb of Ur. I put the story into my own words and told it to the class. See the ‘Sumerian mystery’ Resources file which you can download from www.primaryhistory.org with these teaching notes.

The teaching: Lesson 1

Episode 1

Focus: Telling the first part of the story; raising questions.

I sat the class down and told the children we were travelling back to one of the oldest civilisations: the Sumerian. I told them the story of the finding of the tomb, its riches and its 63 bodies, including that of Queen Shub-ad. The children’s imaginations were captured by the calm postures of the dead guards and handmaidens, by the clay cup beside each guard, by the gold and silver flowers strewn over the floor and by the gold helmet in the form of a wig.

The story was a great stimulus for discussion, and the children speculated about the answers to questions such as:

What might have been in the cups?

Why were so many people buried together?

Why were so many precious things buried with these people?

This raising and debating of questions is at the very heart of history. The process of seeing past people as real, of trying to understand them, had also begun.

Episode 1

Focus: Group discussion – entering the past

I split the class into groups of four or five, and told each group to discuss how they might have felt if they had been alive in the time of Queen Shab-ad.

Has she been a good queen? What did it mean now that she was dead? The children were reminded very clearly that, like the ancient Egyptians, the Sumerians believed that their king and queen were a human embodiment of the gods, a living connection between our world and theirs.

Episode 3

Focus: The children create tableaux reacting to the death of the queen.

I now gave the children just three minutes to work on a still picture, a freeze frame, showing their reaction to the death of the queen. I emphasised that there is no right or wrong way of doing the activity. All through this kind of work it is important that the children are made to work to deadlines: 3 minutes for this, 2 minutes for that. The emphasis is on action and thought, reflection and assessment, in turn. For the teacher, the question: 'How well is this working?' is constantly present.

After three minutes I told the children that I wanted to see their tableaux. They took their positions and I went from group to group to see what they had come up with.

Once all had shown their interpretations I told the groups to devise another two scenes, so that each group would have a short sequence of movements, each followed by a still tableau (freeze frame).

Inevitably, at this point one or two children said: 'I can't do this.' Obviously one needs to be sympathetic, but such is the activity that all children, regardless of academic or physical ability, can participate fully. If ideas do not come immediately, a simple word of encouragement is usually sufficient, as was the case here.

Episode 4

Focus: Adding speech to the tableaux

Once the children had worked on their short sequences and watched each other's tableaux, it was time to add the next element – speech. I asked each group to sit together and to choose one member who would make just one statement. Again, I gave them 3 minutes to decide who was to speak. Some children volunteered, others were selected by their group. I made it clear, however, that the statement was entirely up to the selected child – s/he did not need to discuss it with the group. Each speaker could say anything s/he felt fitted the occasion.

This worked well. One group, of three girls and two boys, used their statement to great effect. Their first position saw one girl leaning with her head on the shoulder of another. The third girl had her hands in the air and was shouting a silent scream. The two boys stared at one another. The girl who was supporting the other said quietly, 'I wonder if the sun will shine tomorrow.' Then they moved into their next position, and continued the sequence.

The teaching: Lesson 2

Episodes 1, 2 and 3

Focus: Adding three new situations to the story

We had worked on the children's reactions to the queen's death. I now gave the children three further situations to respond to. They were:

- Preparing the tomb
- Moving the body from the palace to the tomb
- Beginning the burial ceremony.

As with the first lesson, the children worked in their groups to interpret each scene. Some parts of the expressive sequences involved speech, others simply movement. As the work progressed, I constantly made them run through previous sequences: it was necessary for them to remember each sequence so that in the end it could all be joined together in one expressive visual narrative. This regular revision of scenes had the effect of forcing the children to refine and improve, for since none of the expressive movement was scripted they were free to change and adapt to new and better ideas.

Once we had reached the burial ceremony, it was time to tell the class the rest of the story; this introduced new important elements.

The teaching: Lesson 3

Episode 1

Focus: Telling the rest of the story

In lesson 2 the children had worked well and had, mostly, remembered their movements, expressions and speech for the first four scenes. We had reached the point where the second part of the story was to unfold.

As in lesson 1, the children sat together as I told them, first, the Sumerian myth explaining day and night: how the sun-god, after shining all day, was locked every night into a stone cell by the god of darkness. Each night the sun-god slowly sawed his way through the rock with a golden saw, and each morning he celebrated his escape by filling the world again with light. Secondly came further details of the discoveries in the chambers of the tomb. Here three things seemed of key importance:

- the absence of the king's coffin and body, though his name was repeated many times
- a small golden saw lying near the queen's coffin
- a hole in the roof of the queen's chamber.

A discussion followed in which the children were quick to associate the hole in the roof with the golden saw.

I told them that we now had to find a way of ending the story. What was the best way to end? What did we need to include?

Episode 2

Focus: Working on the fifth scene: the end of the burial ceremony

We had a brief discussion, then I sent the groups away to work on the fifth sequence, entitled: The closing of the tomb. The children were free to decide for themselves how to represent this sequence. Were they to be guards or handmaidens, or perhaps a high priest? How would they decide to finish the burial ceremonies?

The children's two scenes were illuminating. A significant number chose to stay still and die peacefully, while a few others were more active, re-arranging objects, taking care that others were comfortably positioned, before moving off to close the doors.

Each group retained a sense of unity, in that they were moving and performing as a group, while still being able to respond in the individual way that each child wished.

Episode 3

Focus: Practising the final scene

Now for the final scene. I again gave the children a time limit: three minutes only to enact the final scenes. I asked for two tableaux, with no speech, only movement. The burial ceremony is over, the tomb has been sealed – what happens next?

Each group, perhaps dominated by the strength of the story, or perhaps by the strength of the idea, chose to have king figure rising from the tomb and, finding the saw, begin to saw his way through imaginary bars.

As I watched the groups work out their ideas, it became clear how the piece should conclude. I brought the class back together and we discussed ideas. The children and I could see that we needed to bring everyone together for the final scene. Of the several kings (there was one in every group) we chose one, and then brought all the groups in to act out the final scene.

As the children moved gently together, or were grouped in a sleep/death silent tableau, the king arose, searched for the golden saw and, after stretching his way upwards, sawed through the imaginary roof. Then he moved away from everyone else.

Episode 4

Focus: The performance of the story

For the performance, we introduced music. It was chosen not to dominate, but to enhance the mood. It was one of those relaxing tapes, which seemed just right for this story.

The children ran through the whole story once, then were told that we were now going to perform the complete work formally, for the last time.

The children took their starting positions, the music began and I called the first scene: The queen is dead. About five minutes later it was all over. Those five minutes had taken up over two hours of teaching time. However, I felt it had all been worthwhile - see reflections below.

Learning outcomes

The children:

- through enactive learning, gained an understanding of what might have been the sequence of events when a king of Ur died
- gained an insight into the importance of religious myths in Sumerian society
- presented an interpretation that was consistent with the historical information they were given in the story
- showed sympathy for, and understanding of, past people through expressive movement.

Reflection/evaluation

When we had finished I felt that the children needed to reflect on what they had done, and that I needed to confirm that what seemed to have worked well had actually achieved the aims of the lesson. So, once we were back in the classroom I congratulated the children on the quality of their expressive interpretation.

Then I asked them what they thought they had learnt. It is a source of constant amazement to me how thoughtful even young children can be when asked this simple question. I leave you with four of their comments:

I learnt a lot about their religion; they thought their gods were really special.

They must have wanted to die with the queen. I am not sure how I would have felt if that was me. I suppose it must have helped if you really believed you were going to live forever.

I liked the way we were all working together. When I was not sure what to do I looked around and got loads of ideas.

I still don't know what really happened. What was the saw for, and what happened to the king? I would like to find out more.

Nuffield Primary History project

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