



The Eyam Plague
6th
Social Studies/Theater

**Core Curriculum,
Social Studies Standard 2, Objective 2**

Explore the importance of religion in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and its relevance to modern times.

Objective 3a

Examine relationships between significant events and ideas and their influence on systems of government (e.g. ... the impact of the Black Death).

Theater, Standard #1

Playmaking The student will plan and improvise plays based on personal experience and heritage, imagination, literature, and history for informal and formal theatre.

Objective: Through process drama, the students will reconstruct the events of the black plague in the city of Eyam, England in the year 1665. They will analyze the role of religion and government in the decisions made by the people living in the village.

Materials:

Print out a copy of the page marked "Plague Register"

Sources:

The Drama Book; An Active Approach to Learning written by Patrice Baldwin and Lesley Hendy.

Theater Games for the Classroom; A Teacher's Handbook written by Viola Spolin.

Warm-up: Trapped

Description: Ask the students if they have ever been trapped somewhere that they could not get out of. Discuss a few of the responses. Tell the students to think of a place that they could be trapped in. Have the students work simultaneous but individually to create their place and act as though they are trapped.

Side-coaching: Where are you? Establish your boundaries. Try to get out! Push! Really try, but no matter what you do, you can't escape. Use your whole body to try to escape!

Thought Track: Have everyone freeze. Choose a few students to tap on the shoulder. As you tap them, ask them how they feel. Encourage the student to use a variety of words to express their feelings.

Evaluation: Did you feel trapped? What did it feel like? What are some of the places you chose to be trapped in? Where else could you feel trapped?

Hook: Show the “Plague Register” to the students. Ask, “What do you think this would be used for?” If they don’t give the correct answer, tell them that it was used to record the names of the people who died of the plague in a small town in England, called Eyam.

Still-image: We are going back to the year 1665, before the plague came to Eyam. You are all living in the small village. What sort of job might you have? Gather some ideas and have the students create a still-image of an August morning in Eyam, doing one of these jobs.

Improvisation: Bring the scene to life. Allow the scene to run a while

Freeze frame: Freeze the action

Narration: Narrate what is within their frozen scene, e.g. “It is a hot, August day in the year 1665. The harvest has almost been gathered in and the people from the small Derbyshire town of Eyam are busy doing their jobs in the hot sun. (State the jobs the students are doing.) There are about 350 people living in this small town. It has been a long, dry summer. Tell the children that you will be a delivery person who travels from London with a horse and cart collecting and delivering goods. The villagers recognize you as a regular visitor.

Teacher in Role: Restart the action. Move amongst villagers spreading rumors, e.g. “There is a dreadful sickness in London...people are dying in the thousands...they have rashes like a ring of roses ...the sickness is called the Plague...nobody knows what causes it...” Feed in authentic detail. Some children may be wary of you having come from London. Laugh it off! Tell them that you have just delivered a box of cloth to George Viccars, the local tailor. Leave and allow the drama to continue a while.

Freeze frame: Freeze the action.

Narration: As teacher, tell them that people started spreading rumors about the plague. Some rumors are true and some are not. Each child decides upon a rumor that they will spread. Encourage them to make the rumors seem logical, and not ridiculous. What is something that someone at the time might believe?

Teacher in role: You join in spreading a rumor that George Viccars, the tailor has died of the Plague.

Discussion: Decide together afterwards which stories are true and which ones are not. Inform them that the rumor of George Viccars’ death is true. The Plague has come to Eyam!

Improvisation: Ask them to resume their village tasks, aware that anyone might be a plague carrier.

Freeze frame: After a time, freeze the action.

Narration: Yes, the plague has come to Eyam. The villagers live in fear, never knowing who the next victim of the Plague will be.

Thought tracking: Touch the shoulders of a few of the students as a means of inviting them to speak aloud, their thoughts as villagers.

Meetings: Place the students into family groups of 4-6. One of their family is lying sick elsewhere in the house, dying of the plague. They must decide what to do. Tend the sick person or protect themselves? Seek help or keep the illness secret? If the loved one dies, what will they do? Each group reports their intentions and reasoning about their course of action. Allow questioning of each group in role.

Narration: Each Sunday the people of Eyam went to church. The vicar, William Mompesson, has decided to hold services in the open at a place called the Delf to reduce the risk of spreading disease. Have the class stand in spaces well away from each other.

Meeting: Teacher in Role: You will take on the role of William Mompesson. Welcome them to the delf. Acknowledge the fact that many of them have already lost family members and friends to the plague. Make them aware of the fact that none of the neighboring villages has the plague. Tell them that you have a proposal to make. As vicar, persuade them to stay and isolate the disease in their own village. Acknowledge the courage required to stay in Eyam. If practical problems are presented to you, try to make up your own solutions or ask the villagers to suggest ideas, e.g.:
“We’ll run out of food.” (‘It can be left at the village boundary.’)
“Tradesmen won’t serve us.” (‘We’ll disinfect our money with vinegar.’)
“Outsiders may enter the village.” (‘Signs can warn them away.’) Be unswerving in your request, maybe using moral and religious ideas to support your argument. Stress that you are seeking individual promises that they will not leave Eyam. Acknowledge their need to discuss your demand.

Meetings: Ask the family groups to discuss what they should do.

Teacher in Role: meeting: Continuing in the role of the vicar, ask for a vote from each family.

Narration: No matter what the outcome, explain that in reality the people of Eyam chose to isolate themselves within the village so you will do the same.

Explain that there would have been differences of opinion in Eyam and many people stayed although they did not vote to or want to. Because of this you will accept that some of them are staying against their will.

Ritual: On the white board, create a document wherein the villagers agree to stay in Eyam during the course of the plague. Have the head of each household sign the agreement.

Thought tracking: Let's kneel with eyes closed and think about that moment in history when a courageous decision was made. If I touch you on the shoulder, share your thoughts with the class.

Thought tracking: Form an outward facing circle with the class. It has been several months since the plague came to Eyam. You are looking beyond your boundaries to neighboring villages where see people working, children playing, and life going on as usual. Life in Eyam is anything but usual. Tap a few students on the shoulder and have them convey their thoughts.

Thought tracking: The circle then face inwards. You are now living in neighboring villages and looking beyond your borders, into the village of Eyam. Think about the people living there and what they have done in order to keep you safe from the plague Tap a few students on the shoulder and have them convey their thoughts.

Still image: In their family groups, ask them to a frozen image entitled "The saddest thing that we have seen since the Plague." They have been isolated for several months. Show the images and encourage questioning by the audience.

Narration: Narrate their sad moments back whilst moving the drama on. "Many weeks passed in sadness (mention their examples). Each day Eyam villagers went to the boundary to collect food and saw their neighboring villagers at a distance."

Improvisation: Divide the class into two groups at opposite ends of the room. One group is Eyam villagers, the other neighboring villagers who leave supplies. The groups communicate by calling across the space. The neighbors want to know what is happening inside. Eyam villagers may reply in honesty or may make things sound better than they are in case they frighten the neighbors away.

Freeze Frame: After a few minutes freeze the action. Each person has the chance to call out one last sentence to the other group.

Meeting in pairs: The children then sit with a partner. One of them has decided to break the promise. They will try to persuade their partner to escape with them. The second person will try to dissuade the other from leaving. Ask the pairs to try to end up agreeing either to leave or stay. When they are done, ask who is staying and who is leaving. Explain that no one in Eyam broke his or her promise. They all remained in the village until the plague was gone.

Narration: Have the children form a standing circle. Weeks passed. Many people died. If you tapped, please sit down. (Go around the circle, tapping $\frac{3}{4}$ of the students on the shoulder.) The dead were buried by their families in shallow graves. A year passed. At last the deaths stopped. Before the plague, there were 350 people living in Eyam. Now there were 90 people.

Thought tracking: Ask family members who are left to share their thoughts.

Teacher in Role: As vicar, call the villagers to the Delf (all of the students). Say that most of the others have died, but they have been spared. It seems that the Plague is over. They must decide whether to end their isolation. (You may withdraw whilst they decide.)

Narration: They probably decide to end their isolation. If not, then narrate the drama forward to the time when they did, e.g. "At last the villagers decided that the Plague was over."

Freeze Frame: Break into groups of 6-8 and allow the students to create statues commemorating the people of Eyam.

Evaluation: Allow the students time to reflect on the experience and to discuss together what they have learned. Ask the following questions: What was it like to live during the Middle Ages? Would you want to have lived then? Why? What do you think you would have chosen to do if you lived in Eyam? Do you think the people of Eyam regretted their decision? What role did religion and government play in the decision of the people of Eyam? Could something like this happen today? Would people today make the same decision as the people of Eyam did? What role would religion and government have today in such a decision? You may wish to discuss the current situation with Ebola and current attempts at isolation.

Assessment: Have the children again pretend that they are living in Eyam. The plague is over. Give them the assignment of writing a letter to a friend outside of Eyam. Include important facts about Eyam in the letter. Emphasize the importance of these letters since this is the first time in over a year that someone was willing to deliver letters from the people of Eyam.

Plague Register