



## The Great Depression

5<sup>th</sup> Grade

Social Studies/Theater

by Linda Gold

### **Social Studies, Standard #5 Objective 1b**

Summarize the consequences of the Great Depression on the United States (e.g. mass migration, the New Deal).

### **Drama Standard 5.T.CR.6:**

Develop dialogue and actions that focus on the development and resolution of dramatic conflicts.

### **Standard 5.T.P.3:**

Observe, listen, and respond in character to other actors throughout a scripted or improvised scene.

**Objective:** In order to understand the Great Depression, the students must first experience the prosperity of the 1920s as they make decisions regarding consumer spending and debt. They will then be put into groups to act out the consequences of the Great Depression. The lesson plan is divided into two parts. Each part will take 45 min.

### **Materials:**

Print off the pictures to show to the class.

Print off the consumer goods and services pages to pass out parts to the class.

Print off the consequences page to pass out parts to the class.

### **Part 1 - the 1920s**

- **Warm-up: Machines** Instructions: One student will begin by performing a simple, repetitive motion. One at a time, students will become part of the first student's action. The idea is to add onto what has already been established without changing it and without duplicating it. Each new action should be connected in some way to what is already happening so that each new student adding on becomes part of the whole. Once everyone has become part of the machine, have the students imagine a sound that their part will make. Establish an imaginary lever that controls the speed of the machine. Have the students begin making their sounds. Adjust the lever to slow down and speed up the machine, eventually going so fast that the machine blows up.
- **Discussion:** What do you think our machine was making? Why? (Don't accept random answers. Make them tell you what the machine was doing that gave them the idea.) What sort of machines to you think they were using in the 1920's? (airplanes, trains, cameras, movie cameras, bicycles, cars, refrigerators, radios, phonographs, dishwashers, vacuums, toasters, curling irons, waffle makers, hairdryers, telephones, washing machines)
- **Hook:** Show some pictures of 1920's consumer goods. Discuss the term "consumer goods" as you show the pictures. The pictures shown here, left to right and top to bottom: refrigerator, telephone, washing machine, hair dryer, radio, stove, dishwasher, camera, vacuum, toaster.

- **Role selection:** Choose children to play the roles of a typical family from the 1920s. Dad – George; Mother – Betty; Children – Harold, Frank, Helen, Dorothy and Alice. The rest of the class is put into groups of 2 -4 and given a slip of paper which describes the consumer good or service they must try to sell to George and his family.
- **Active Storytelling:** George has just received a \$200 bonus at work. He came home to tell his wife Betty the good news. George and Betty try to decide how to spend the money. George wants to invest in the stock market, Betty wants a new washing machine, Harold wants a new car, Frank wants a new radio, Helen wants a new refrigerator, Dorothy wants to go to the movies and Alice wants to go visit Grandma. Door to door salesmen come to visit the family to try to sell them their goods.
- **Improvisation:** George and his family are visited by each group, one at a time. Each group tries to convince George and his family to buy their product. The family member who “wants” that product should do their best to convince George to buy it. They should visit the bank last to consider a loan to buy all of the consumer goods and services. As the family purchases items, list them on the board so they can be totaled at the end.
- **Decision alley:** One side tries to convince George to take out a loan at the bank in order to afford all the things his family wants. One side tries to convince George to wait and save his money.
- **Meeting:** have the students meet in small groups or families to determine how they would spend the money and why. Have them present their plan to the class.
- **Discussion:** Ask the students the following questions: What do you think caused the great prosperity of the 1920s? (World War I was the main cause. Following the war there was a surplus of food which lowered prices and gave people more money to spend on consumer goods. You could discuss the principle of supply and demand.) What is wrong with having too much consumer debt? What are ways of avoiding too much consumer debt? Is there anything that you would like to have now that you cannot afford? How do you plan on getting it?

## **Part 2 – the Great Depression**

- **Warm-up: Everybody Counts**  
In this activity, you will count up to the number of people in the room. Everyone gets to say only one number. That way, everyone will have the opportunity to count. The counting will go in numerical order (1, 2, 3 etc.) and in English. It cannot be predetermined who will say which number. One someone feels like it is their turn, they will say the next number. However, if two people say the same number, you must start over again. When you get to end, make sure that everyone in the room has said a number.

**Side-Coaching:** Slow down! You must feel the energy in the room to know when it is your turn to go. We will never win this if you keep jumping in. We either all win it together or we all lose it together. It is no more important to be in the first 5 numbers than it is to be in the last 5 numbers. Everyone can say only one number. Once you have said a number, you are done.

**Evaluation:** Was anyone any more important in this game than anyone else? Is anyone in this room any more important than anyone else? How about in the school, or in your neighborhood,

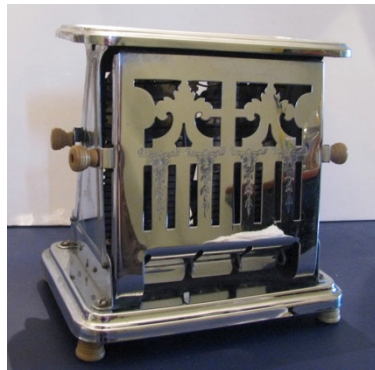
is anyone more important than anyone else? Some people may be more important to you than other people are, but everyone here has a place and purpose and everyone is equally important.

- Divide the students into 7 groups. Give each group one of the consequences of the Great Depression. Give them some time to plan their scene. Side-coach each group by going around and making sure they are clear on what they are to do.
- Following each scene, discuss what happened with the class. Allow the actors to answer any questions the audience has about the scene. If the actors do not know the answers, help them explain.
- After all scenes have performed, talk about what helped us to come out of the Great Depression. You may wish to discuss the work ethic of the people in the 1930s, Roosevelt's new deal policies and World War II.

## Consumer Goods and Services

1. Background: In order to produce a less expensive car, Henry Ford created the assembly line. The car would move down a conveyer belt and stop in front of each person long enough for that person to add one part to the car. Ford could make a car in 2 hours while other manufacturers took up to 12 hours to make a car. Ford was able to sell cars for just \$260.  
Scene: Try to sell George and his family a Ford.
2. Background: 1920s washing machines had tubs for the clothes and water and wringers mounted on top. The clothes had to be hand fed into the wringers and sometimes people got their fingers caught in them. The machine you are selling as a new feature: a release mechanism that will open the wringers if a finger gets stuck in them. People could not always pay the full price for them, so stores allowed them to make installment payments. Installment buying means that you pay a little now and pay a little every month until it is paid off. In the long run, they will have to pay a little more for the item, but they can have it and enjoy it now.  
Scene: Try to sell George and his family a washing machine for \$125. Convince them to use installment buying.
3. Background: Radios were a major source of home entertainment. There was a great variety of programming including jazz music, sports, dramatic shows and comedies. There were more than 800 radio stations that were listened to by 10 million families across the country! People could not always pay the full price for the products, so stores allowed them to make installment payments. Installment buying means that you pay a little now and pay a little every month until it is paid off. In the long run, they will have to pay a little more for the item, but they can have it and enjoy it now.  
Scene: Try to convince George and his family to buy a radio for \$120. Convince them to use installment buying.
4. Background: In the 1920s, most people owned ice boxes. You had to buy a new block of ice when yours melted. Refrigerators were available but they were very expensive. They did a much better job of keeping food cold and you didn't have to buy blocks of ice for them. People could not always pay the full price for the product, so stores allowed them to make installment payments. Installment buying means that you pay a little now and pay a little every month until it is paid off. In the long run, they will have to pay a little more for the item, but they can have it and enjoy it now.  
Scene: Try to convince George and his family to buy a refrigerator for \$285. Convince them to use installment buying.
5. Background: Aviation, or air transportation, grew into a commercial industry in the 1920s. Airplanes were invented in 1903 by the Wright Brothers. They were used in World War I as fighter planes. Now it is possible for people to travel by plane.  
Scene: try to sell George and family airplane tickets to go to visit grandma.  
Airplane tickets are \$5 each. You may need to convince them that airplanes are safe.

6. Background: The movie industry was big business. Hollywood was becoming the movie capital of the world. In 1927, film makers began making movies with sound. The first movie with sound was called "The Jazz Singer". People referred to a film with sound as a "talkie".  
Scene: Try to convince George and his family to buy tickets to see the Jazz singer. Movie tickets are 25 cents each.
  
7. Background: Stock Market. If a company wants to sell shares, or part of their company to the public, they make it available on the stock market. People buy as many shares as they want in the company. A stockbroker helps people buy and sell stock in companies. If a company's stock is popular, and a lot of people want to buy it, the price goes up. If the stock is not popular, the price goes down. Most people try to buy stock when the price is down and sell it when the price is up.  
Scene: try to sell George and his family shares in General Electric, a company that produces many popular consumer goods. The cost is \$125 per share but you are willing to sell to him on margin. That means he can buy more stock than he can afford and you will loan him the rest of the money.
  
8. Background: Banks were willing to loan money for almost anything. You could even take out a loan to buy stock on the stock market or to purchase consumer goods.  
Scene: try to convince George and his family to take out a load to buy the things he cannot afford yet. It will be more convenient for them to have one loan to pay every month instead of paying each store every month.



## Consequences of the Great Depression

1. Background: Stock market crash: On October 24, 1929, thousands of people started to sell their stocks and prices fell. On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed and started the Great Depression. People who invested in the market lost their money.

Scene: One of you is a broker and the others are people who want to sell their stock. The broker will give the first person full price for their stock, the second person half price for their stock, and the rest of the people get nothing for their stock. It is now worthless.
2. Background: Banks had to call loans in. Calling in a loan means that the people who borrowed money from you were told they had to pay it back now. Most people could not pay the banks back. Many lost their homes. The banks who had loaned out too much money had to close.

Scene: One of you is a banker. Tell the other people in your group that they must pay back their loans. You could also have someone in your group who wants to take their savings out of the bank but they cannot because there is no money left in the bank. The bank has to close.
3. Background: Commercial industry was hit hard. People stopped buying consumer goods so factory workers lost their jobs. By 1932, the unemployment rate was 24%. One in every 4 workers had lost their jobs. Many people were homeless and starving.

Scene: One of you owns a factory that has to close down because no one is buying your goods. The others in your group are workers who are losing their jobs. The factory owner has to tell the people that they no longer have a job.
4. Background: Soup Kitchens were set up to help feed the people. They had to wait in line with a bucket for free soup. There wasn't very much in the soup, it was mostly broth.

Scene: One of you runs the soup kitchen and scoops out soup for the others who wait in line with a bucket. Be sure to let the audience know that it is mostly broth.
5. Background: President Franklin D. Roosevelt created what he called "The New Deal". It added a lot of government bureaucracy (workers and groups who run the government) and was a way of providing jobs for some of the people. One of his projects was to build hydroelectric dams in several locations. These dams provided electricity to many homes. He also established minimum wages and federally insured loans.

Scene: One of you is Franklin D. Roosevelt, talking to the audience about your "New Deal". The rest of you will be workers, building the Hoover Dam. You should be excited about having a job.
6. Background: Farms now had a surplus of crops so prices dropped. Since farmers were not making very much money, they could not pay off loans. Many lost their farms.

Scene: One of you is the banker and the others are farmers. The farmers go to the bank and explain why they can't pay back their loans. The banker takes the farms away.
7. From 1931-1936 there had been little rain in the panhandle. (Texas, Oklahoma, and adjacent parts of Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico.) There were huge dust storms that blew away all of the top soil. The thirties became known as the dirty thirties and the panhandle became known as the dust bowl. Farmers could not plant crops and almost all of them lost their farms. Many left for California with promises of jobs that did not exist.

Scene: You are farmers trying to plant seeds on your farm when a huge dust storm comes up. You must run to the house to take cover. When you look out the window, you see that all of your seeds are blowing away with the dirt.