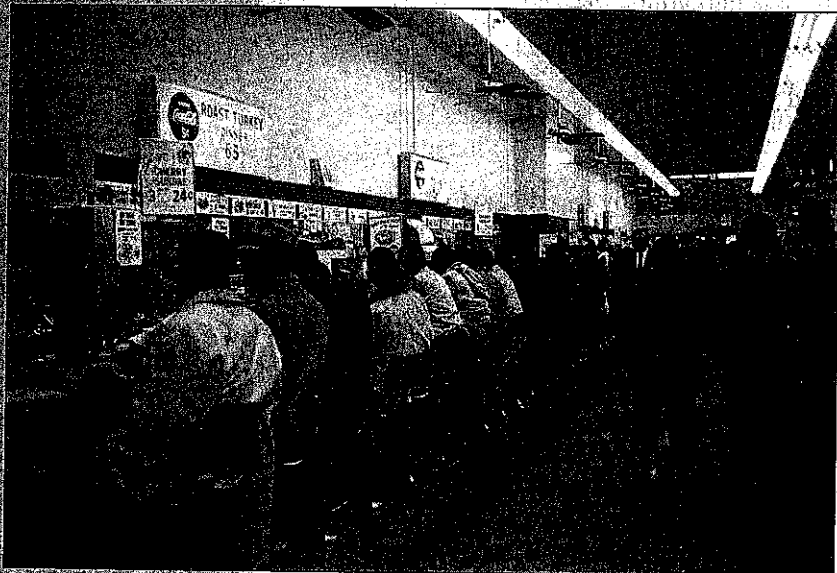


DEMOCRACY AND EMPOWERMENT: THE NASHVILLE STUDENT SIT-INS

By Rändi Douglas

During the 1960s across the South, African-American college students launched a sit-in campaign in southern restaurants that spread to 100 cities in a six-month period. The campaign focused national attention on their grievances and led to several Supreme Court decisions interpreting the First Amendment.



“**S**tudent Sit-Ins of the 1960s” is a process drama structured around the Nashville lunch counter sit-ins of 1960. It was developed and presented as a team effort by Josh White Jr. and me as part of a special curriculum project on the First Amendment to the Constitution. This lesson is part of my larger passion for teaching about the American culture of democracy.

The story behind the development of “Student Sit-Ins of the 1960s” as a process drama activity goes like this: In 1991 I was listening to National Public Radio when I heard a special report from the American Bar Association honoring the 200th birthday of the Bill

of Rights. The report disclosed that two-thirds of adult Americans cannot correctly identify the Bill of Rights, and that only one in ten knows that it protects individuals from the power of the state. A disturbing thought. What hope is there for sustaining and improving our democracy if two-thirds of the voting age citizens don’t know anything about it? But we have all been “taught” the Bill of Rights in school, sometimes over and over again. Why doesn’t anyone remember? I started thinking about ways to teach the Bill of Rights that might “stick.” My interest in process drama and enthusiasm for the whole learning experience inherent in roleplaying convinced me that “living through” these Bill of Rights issues could provide a memorable foundation for understanding this crucial document.

The next step was to seek funding to develop an educational program using process drama to explore the First Amendment, the cornerstone of the Bill of Rights and American democracy. Because I had been teaching primarily in Detroit inner-city schools, I also wanted the program to appeal to African-American students. Episodes in the evolution of our society that we habitually label as African-American history are significant expressions of the foundations of democracy and deserve an important place in the total curriculum for all American students, whatever their cultural origins. This led me to the next crucial choice in the process—a working partner.

I had already collaborated with Josh White Jr., the African-American folk musician, writing music for a cultural project for the Detroit Historical Museum. In our conversations about work, I shared my enthusiasm for using drama in the classroom, and he expressed an interest in participating in this process and learning about the work. We had also talked at length about music as a kind of “bonding agent” in the learning process—

Following months of preparation, the Nashville students begin their lunch counter sit-ins February 13, 1960.

how our personal memories, impressions of history, and commitment to ideas can often be triggered by a song. I approached Josh about collaborating on the project, and we agreed to be a team.

We both felt that this working partnership would present an excellent teaching model in the classroom—a male/female and an African/European descent collaborating team. The classes would perceive that the First Amendment heritage was “our” collective history, crucially important common property. We were also intrigued by the prospect of experimenting with music as a way of bonding students to the learning experience. We agreed we would use both traditional and original song, providing musical underpinnings where we wanted to leave the students with a lasting impression.

I consulted with a Detroit lawyer with a special interest in First Amendment issues, and we determined that freedom of the press, freedom to assemble, and intellectual freedom might be appropriate issues to introduce to students.

The Project—The Bill of Rights: Freedom to Assemble

“Let’s take a history trip, back in time to the 1960s,” we begin by telling the students, “when a gallon of gas cost a quarter and, on Sunday night, we all gathered to watch Ed Sullivan on TV.” Josh White Jr., my teaching partner, plays and sings part of the ’60s song “Get Together” by the Youngbloods.

The Student Meeting

Josh welcomes students to the first organizing meeting for the student sit-ins. He explains the plan. Students will occupy seats at lunch counters that have previously been reserved “for whites only.” He describes the possible reactions of the police and the potential for violence, at the same time explaining the concept of nonviolence. Then Josh introduces the character Diane Nash, who was an actual student activist in the 1960s and a student at Fisk. I take on this new role and explain the relationship between nonviolence and the goal of the sit-ins, which is to take the lunch counter issue to court. “If there is any violence from us,” Diane explains, “they will prosecute us and we won’t be able to test the law. If we remain absolutely passive, then we’ll have the best chance for a court judgment in our favor.” Next on the meeting agenda, a student is asked to come forward and read a list of nonviolent tactics: Do show yourself friendly at the counter at all times. Do sit straight and always face the counter. Don’t strike back or curse back if attacked. Don’t laugh out loud. Don’t hold conversations. Don’t block entrances.

You may choose to face physical assault without protecting yourself, hands at the sides, unclenched; or you may choose to protect yourself, making it plain that you do not intend to hit back. If you choose to protect yourself, practice positions such as these:

- To protect the skull, fold the hands over the head.
- To prevent disfigurement of the face, bring the elbows together in front of the eyes.



Early on this spring morning, the home of Attorney Z. Alexander Looby was heavily damaged by a bomb (Looby defended the arrested students). This photo illustrates the silent march of 5,000, led by Reverend C. T. Vivian, Diane Nash, and Bernard Lafayette, which resulted in a confrontation on the steps of city hall with Mayor Ben West.

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- To prevent internal injury from kicks: For girls, lie on the side and bring the knees upward to the chin; for boys, kneel down and arch over, with the skull and face protected.

Josh and I lead the students through these positions as they are described. Then we divide the students into small groups, set up some potential lunch counter seats, and ask them to make a "freeze frame" picture or tableau of defensive nonviolent techniques the moment just before the contact occurs (we demonstrate what one might look like to get the students thinking). "Some students will have to embody hecklers or lawmen; in these tableaux, they may have clubs or fire hoses, and they may try to get us off the chairs," we say. Then we circulate through the room and assist in creating the "freeze frames."

The tableaux are physically very dramatic and actualize the potential for violence at the sit-ins. We look for ways to name the techniques. Some students link arms, it is called "chain"; others stack their bodies over each other, we call it "dominoes." We see the "knee high," "circle dunk," and "buddy bye"—all ways the students devise to protect themselves physically and hold their positions in case of attack.

We congratulate the students on a productive meeting and, designating a line across the floor, tell them they now have to make a choice. Any students with private reasons why they cannot participate on the front line where the potential for bodily harm is greatest will need to remain behind the line. They will be organized as support workers, making phone calls, helping with office work, etc. All who feel prepared to sit in tomorrow should step across the line. We note the few students who may remain behind; we will give them alternate roles to play later.

The Sit-Ins

The meeting is adjourned; it is the next morning, and students are loaded into buses to ride downtown. We ask the students to stand in a bus formation, rows of two or three divided by an aisle. Josh "boards" the bus with his guitar and urges the students to join in singing on their way downtown. He sings a song, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," an adaptation of an old spiritual that was used by the Freedom Marchers in Georgia in 1962. He plays the guitar softly while I read the words of John Lewis, a student activist who had been trained in nonviolent protest methods:

We had on that day over 500 students in front of Fisk University chapel, to be transported downtown to the First Baptist Church, to be organized into small groups to sit in at the lunch counters. We took our seats in a very orderly, peaceful fashion. The students were dressed like they were on their way to church or to a big social affair. They had their books, and we stayed there at the lunch counter, studying and preparing our homework, because we were denied service. The managers ordered that the lunch counters be closed, that the restaurants be closed, and we'd just sit there all day long.

We disperse the students and organize a line of ten chairs across the center of the room. Working with half the class at a time, we ask ten "frontline" students to sit in the chairs. Then we select four support people to play parts of the waiters, waitresses, and manager of the restaurant and designate a kitchen area for them.

Time Passes

We organize three "photographs" or tableaux of the first day of the student sit-ins in these time intervals: the first hour, the fifth hour, the tenth hour. The first-hour students look alert, concentrated, and the waitresses generally show astonishment, outrage, disgust. At the fifth hour the postures begin to sag, as students lean on each other and variously show they are hungry and thirsty. Waitresses often pick ways to taunt the demonstrators, like eating and drinking in front of them. The tenth-hour students sink way down, fall asleep,

look utterly bored. We ask the watching students to supply captions for people in the picture and ask "What might this person be thinking?" The students speak the thoughts of the demonstrators aloud.

As a final picture, we then ask some of the watching students to play spectators looking through the windows, and finally the police, arriving with their billy clubs. We organize one final picture. Hecklers and police enter the restaurant to remove the students from their chairs; the students call out nonviolent positions such as "chain" or "dominoes" from the earlier tableaux and freeze in defensive positions. This last picture is a stark contrast to the static tedium of the previous version; suddenly the whole room is physically alert and focused.

In this series of frozen moments, the event of the student sit-ins is realized in both visual and kinesthetic terms. Writing about the experience later, some students will recall the boredom and tedium of the long wait; many others talk about the tension, fear, potential danger, and the feelings of being vulnerable. Several students will mention the importance of fighting for rights, even if it is dangerous.

Further Developments

If time allows, we continue exploring the drama. Depending on the tendencies expressed by the students so far, we may focus on the parent-child or parent-university relationship. We tag ten students and announce that have been arrested, isolating them in the corner of the room. We allow them one phone call. This they improvise in pairs. Their ideas are then shared with the larger group. Next, concerned parents may meet with the dean to discuss the sit-ins. What position should the parents and university take about the students' actions?

Another direction for the drama is to focus on follow-up decision-making by the organizers themselves. Demonstrators may meet to decide what strategies to pursue after the arrests. What can be done to support and replace those in jail? Can we find new leadership? How will we handle the growing interest of the media? White students may arrive from the North on a bus and want to sit in, too. The demonstrators meet to decide whether or not to allow this.

Conclusion

We always try to end the session in the following way: We tell everyone that there were too many long and boring days of sitting in. Students couldn't talk to each other much. Writing was often the only outlet, the only thing to do. They wrote notes to each other, to parents or friends about what they were doing, what it meant to them, and how they felt about it. We ask each student to write such a letter and, when they are finished, to leave it in the center of the room. Then we ask each to find a letter that is not theirs, select the most important sentence, and gather in the center of the room.

While Josh plays the guitar, we ask for an impromptu choral reading from the students, using parts of the letters as text and joining in at the moment in the reading their



Sit-ins continue at the segregated lunch counters at the Nashville Greyhound Bus Station. Fisk University graduate student Marion Barry (center of photo)

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instinct tells them is the right point for their message. A range of feelings emerge—boredom from sitting in, pride, fear, anger, relief that nobody got hurt. And we hear statements of commitment as well:

Dear Mother, You have always taught me to stand up for my rights as a human and as an American. A test of such was presented to me. Its grade: a jail sentence.

This is all about thinking differently—changing people's minds.

Dear Nicole, I don't believe the confusion in our world today. If only you could be here, at this moment on the streets of this city. The feelings of hate in this city are so strong—never before have I experienced such tension.

Those ten hours were some of the longest hours of my life but also some of my proudest hours.

Dear Mr. President, I'm sitting in a restaurant. Why?

Please let something happen. I don't want this to be a wasted effort.

To my parents: I know you want me to succeed in college, but I want to succeed in what's important for all first I am in jail for going in an all-white diner. This is not a shame for me, it is an honor to be part of it.

The session closes with Josh leading the group in the civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome."

Reflection

During the two-hour session, students have a first-hand encounter with the history of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. They join in the struggle that is a metaphor for the African-American experience—fighting for a place at the table of democracy. The drama also conveys the importance of First Amendment rights in sustaining a just society. The student sit-ins are an inspiring lesson in empowerment: A group of college students use the established procedures of democratic government to initiate an effective change in their community that reflects the highest American ideal, liberty and justice for all.

The white students who wrote the letters included above were also asked to fill out written evaluations. Responses to the question, "What did you learn?" concern both history and values. Many indicate new knowledge about "how hard it was for Blacks, the risks they took, how they felt and were treated." Others indicate surprise at the seriousness of the protests. "What really happened in the '60s was not all about drugs."

A majority of students write about ignorance, racism, prejudice, and segregation and affirm the belief that everyone should have equal rights. Some students focus on learning from the process itself: "I learned about the thinking that's involved.... You have to fight for what you want.... We can change things that are wrong without violence.... You see from other points of view what life was like, almost like you knew their thoughts."

Asked if this kind of teaching can help students to learn, responses were overwhelmingly positive—115 yes, one maybe, and zero no. Why? Students describe process drama as "a fun way to learn.... You're living it.... It makes you think.... Use your imagination.... Acting out helps you remember more because you participate.... You experience it instead of just being told.... Being involved in situations helps you understand.... You learn better, 'cause staring at books puts you to sleep.... It's not like school. I think I could learn more this way in a day than I could in a week of school."



Resources

The First Amendment

There are only 46 words in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of a religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

The Sit-Ins

This unit of study will be enriched by selected readings. We used first-hand accounts of this struggle, such as Juan Williams' *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954–1965* and *The Civil Rights Reader: Basic Documents of the Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Leon Friedman (1968). A particularly useful book that helped us in developing the unit is *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*, by Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn (1990).

The following extracts from *Voices of Freedom* provide a vivid picture of the events of the time:

Diane Nash, who was a student at Fisk University when she became involved in the Civil Rights Movement:

The sit-ins were really highly charged, emotionally. In our nonviolent workshops, we had decided to be respectful of the opposition, and try to keep issues geared towards desegregation, not get sidetracked. The first sit-in we had was really funny, because the waitresses were nervous. They must have dropped two thousand dollars' worth of dishes that day. It was almost a cartoon. One in particular, she was so nervous, she picked up dishes and she'd drop one, and she'd pick up another one, and she'd drop it. It was really funny, and we were sitting there trying not to laugh, because we thought that laughing would be insulting and we didn't want to create that kind of atmosphere. At the same time we were scared to death.

John Lewis, a student at the American Baptist Theological Seminary, who had been trained in nonviolent protest:

The first day nothing in terms of violence or disorder happened. This continued for a few more days and it continued day in and day out. Finally, on Saturday, February 27, when we had about 100 students prepared to go down—it was a very beautiful day in Nashville—we got a call from a local white minister who had been a real supporter of the Movement. He said that if we go down on this particular day, he understood that the police would stand to the side and let a group of white hoodlums and thugs come in and beat people up, and then we would be arrested. We made a decision to go, and we all went to the same store. It was a Woolworth in the heart of the downtown area, and we occupied every seat at the lunch counter, every seat in the restaurant, and it did happen. A group of young white men came in and they started pulling and beating primarily on the young women.



Reverend James Lawson trained the students in the philosophy and practice of non-violence, as inspired by Gandhi. In March of 1960, Vanderbilt expelled Lawson for his participation in the Civil Rights Movement.

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They put lighted cigarettes down their backs, in their hair, and they were really beating people. In a short time police officials came in and placed all of us under arrest, and not a single member of the white group, the people that were opposing our sit-in, was arrested.

That was the first time that I was arrested. Growing up in the rural South, you learned it was not a thing to do. To go to jail was to bring shame and disgrace on the family. But for me it was like being involved in a holy crusade, it became a badge of honor. I think it was in keeping with all we had been taught in the workshops, so I felt very good, in the sense of righteous indignation, about being arrested, but at the same time I felt the commitment and dedication on the part of the students.

Diane Nash

After we started sitting in, we were surprised and delighted to hear of other cities joining in the sit-ins. And I think we started feeling the power of the idea whose time had come. Before we did the things we did, we had no inkling that the Movement would become as widespread as it did. I remember realizing that we were coming up against governors, judges, politicians, businessmen, and I remember thinking, 'I'm only 22 years old, what do I know, what am I doing?' And I felt very vulnerable. So when we heard these newscasts, that other cities had demonstrations, it really helped. Because there were more of us. And it was very important.

The Movement had a way of reaching inside you and bringing out things that even you didn't know were there. Such as courage. When it was time to go to jail, I was much too busy to be afraid.

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