

Heritage: 'And Should We Die...' Attributes of the Pioneers in Character Sketches

Summary

Showing various attributes of the pioneers through character sketches allows students greater understanding and empathy with their cultural heritage.

Time Frame

4 class periods of 45 minutes each

Group Size

Large Groups

Life Skills

Thinking & Reasoning, Communication, Social & Civic Responsibility

Materials

Pioneer accounts that show specific character attributes; journals, trail accounts, folklore stories, etc.

Edgar Lee Master's Spoon River Anthology

Background for Teachers

The pioneer spirit included specific character attributes: curiosity, self-reliance, determination, restlessness, courage, etc. Many of these stories that illustrate such attributes live beyond the death of the pioneers, even though many died along the trail. As students define these with specific examples from pioneer journals and documents, they can write a first-person account that allows people to see what these pioneers may have felt and thought. Students write short vignettes that illustrate a pioneer's character, then present them as if speaking from the dust: a Spoon River Anthology-type presentation of dead pioneers.

Intended Learning Outcomes

Students will 1) Understand the lifestyles and times of the Western Movement, particularly pioneers on the Mormon Trail, 2) Discover causes of death along the trail, 3) Use specific details to support a character attribute in a character sketch, 4) Use the writing process to plan, draft, revise, and edit a character sketch, 5) Present their findings through a short dramatic presentation.

Instructional Procedures

Read selections from pioneer journals. Discuss the thoughts and feelings read in the journals.

Discuss lifestyles and times of the pioneers. (Refer to the Heritage Gateway Curriculum for a list of essential questions/themes that may be related.)

Provide a model as an example of a short vignette in first person that shows a specific story illustrating a character attribute. You may wish to use an excerpt from Edgar Lee Master's Spoon River Anthology, a short poem from Cynthia Rylant, or a teacher-made character sketch. Discuss the character of the pioneers. (OPTIONAL: Give plenty of drama to the presentation: costume, lighting, effective oral interpretation.)

Give background about the pioneers: statistics and causes of death, motivations and hardships of the trek, examples of burial and pioneer cemeteries, specific stories about many of these pioneers who

died along the way. Use visuals, multi-media presentations, the Internet to supply information. Show how students can research on their own to find out information about a specific pioneer. Discuss the possible causes of death, hardships, and problems of the pioneers.

Give the writing assignment: Students find at least two stories that illustrate a specific character attribute (possibly from a list of attributes), then write about it in first-person narration. The story must be historically accurate, detailed, and directly support the character attribute.

Have students use the writing process to revise and edit their drafts, using peer response groups, teacher conferencing, mini-lessons about character sketches or poem form, etc. Making a class anthology of final draft character sketches may motivate good writing as they work towards class publication.

Illustrate the oral interpretation expectation of these character sketches by explaining a product guide and/or modeling how their character sketches may be performed. Schedule the order of performances and encourage costuming.

On the day of performance, set the students up in rows imitating tombstones in a cemetery. Students sit with their backs to the audience (another class or part of the class at a time), then stand up and turn around to recite their vignette. Memorized lines are most effective, although students can read their part if they have practiced with good oral interpretation. Have low lighting or spot-lighting for each presentation, if possible. Background music and/or sound effects may also be effective.

Have students assess the performances, the written product, and their learning using a product guide and/or rubric.

Extensions

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Assessment Plan

A product guide for this assignment should include the essential parts and attributes of a good character sketch written product (i.e., using the writing process, clear and effective support of at least one attribute, historical accuracy, etc.), an effective oral interpretation (i.e., expression, volume, pitch, eye contact), and possibly a self-assessment of what the student has learned about pioneers and the Westward Movement.

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