SHOWING, NOT TELLING

Tableau as an Embodied Text

Margaret Branscombe

"The tableau work gave me more energy in my brain."

These words were spoken by a third-grade student in response to a series of lessons where the students used their bodies to represent main ideas in informational texts. The role of the body is neglected in education, yet it is a growing area of interest and study. Johnson (1989) reminds us of the roles that our bodies play, not just in learning but in living: "Human beings have bodies that are the locus of their complex interactions with their environments" (p. 366). I believe there is a need for educators to be more intentional about infusing learning with activities that involve the body, this locus of interaction. This article positions the body as a tool for learning in the elementary classroom by describing the affordances of a process drama convention known as *tableau* (plural *tableaux*).

Process Drama

As the name suggests, process drama is not about a finished play or performance. In fact, there is likely to be no external audience other than the class that is engaged in the process of creating the fictional drama. The drama that unfolds depends on the creative direction of the students and is often improvised. Collaboration is key in process drama; the learning happens as students share and negotiate ideas for a dramatic presentation.

A tableau in process drama (also known as a "still image" or a "frozen picture") is a silent, human sculpture that is created by a group of participants to "represent an interpretation of an event, action, location, or scene from a book" (Tortello, 2004, p. 207). As this definition suggests, *tableau* is used most frequently with fictional or historical texts, but in this article, I am positioning tableau as an effective and engaging tool for representing and responding to abstract ideas within informational texts. This article is partly in response to current reading policy that requires a greater focus on informational texts in the elementary classroom, but it also comes from a belief in the importance of action in learning.

"Brains Are for Action!"

This declaration was written by Glenberg, Jaworski, and Rischal (2007) in response to the question "What are brains for?" After explaining how the brain controls the execution of physical responses, the authors concluded that brains are indeed for action (Glenberg, Jaworski, & Rischal, 2007). In an admission of initial skepticism about tableau, Wilson (2003) described how she was won over by the very elements that ran counter to her own teaching style: "I taught with a psycholinguistic, verbal bent. Yet when I was introduced to tableau, my attention was drawn to its worth as a thinking action" (p. 376). Referring to tableau as a "thinking action" suggests an integrated approach to cognition that refutes a Cartesian mind/body divide and brings us back to the third-grade student's reflection that "the tableau work gave me more energy in my brain."

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The idea that brains are for action is a useful counterpoint to the relegation of the body as unnecessary in classroom learning. This belief results in students being seated for the majority of the time. John-Steiner (1997) believes this physical inertia "shapes our representations of thought. Our images and discussions of the processes of the mind are often devoid, as a result, of any bodily components" (p. 16). I believe it is the very embodied nature of drama that accounts for its notable absence in schools (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). Classroom drama does not involve sitting down, silently reading a textbook, and taking a test. Creating a tableau involves pushing back the desks and physically interacting with texts and the people around you.

Pause and Ponder

- Think about your current reading instruction. Do you see opportunities for students to become more physically engaged? Have you considered trying an interactive read-aloud with a small group? Have you considered asking the students to pose as if they were certain characters from a book? Could they contribute a thought or a line of dialogue from the point of view of that character?

- How might you adapt the examples given in this article to your specific situation and the texts you use in the classroom? Could you adapt the examples to include an interactive read-aloud of poetry?

- The article refers to the tableaux as evidence of student understanding of main ideas in informational texts. How could a tableau be used to assess student appreciation and understanding of fiction texts?

Tableau as an Embodied Text

Embodiment has been defined as "the enactment of knowledge and concepts through the activity of our bodies" (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013, p. 445). In a tableau, students use their bodies to express a range of gestures and postures to signify meaning. Wilson (2003) identified four focal points that helped her "read" and analyze the tableaux of first and second graders: facial expressions, use of hands, body posture, and spacing between the participants of the tableau. The children posed as characters from stories that had been read to them and used "their bodies as a way to think" about the feelings of characters and their relationships to each other (p. 379). The positioning of the body as a site of knowing accords with the work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who believed perception did not just belong to the senses but was a function of the whole body (Merleau-Ponty & Baldwin, 2004). In this way, knowledge becomes an embodied experience rather than one associated with the mind alone.

Tableau as a Tool for Learning and a Collaborative Practice

Describing tableau as a tool for learning connects the practice of tableau with one of Vygotsky's central learning theories. He believed the use of tools shaped our cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978) and that speech as a communicative tool affected the internal process of thinking: "The relation between thought and words is a living process; thought is born through words" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 255). But how does this theory apply to tableau, which is, after all, a silent form of communication?

"Creating a tableau involves pushing back the desks and physically interacting with texts."

I am transposing Vygotsky's idea of thought being changed through speaking to a child's conceptualization of a main idea being strengthened through the act of representing it in a tableau. It is in effect comprehension in action, or as Wilson (2003) says, "Gesture does more than express thought, it is thought" (p. 378).

Also important from a Vygotskian standpoint is that a tableau is constructed *collaboratively,* and Vygotsky (1978) believed that the best opportunities for learning always started with social interaction: "All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals" (p. 57). As a collaborative practice, creating a tableau is mediated by individual ideas coming together to present a synthesized image. This practice is in stark contrast to the following description of education today: "The kind of psychology that's practiced in schools is concerned with and almost exclusively focused on the mind of the individual student" (Smagorinsky, 2014, para. 1). Smagorinsky then offers an alternative image: "I'd like to see a more expansive psychology that takes into account the *social environment of human development* become more widespread" (para. 1). The experience of creating tableau is "expansive" in many ways, perhaps most importantly in expanding our concept of what constitutes a "text" in the classroom.

Tableau as a Text

An expansive view of literacy allows for a tableau itself to be considered a text—one that is three-dimensional and quite literally embodied. Themes and ideas can be transferred from a printed text to a tableau "text" in a process known as *transmediation* (Suhor, 1984). This transference of content between sign systems has been described as promoting "the kind of thinking that goes beyond the display of received meanings to the invention of new connections and meanings" (Siegel, 1995, p. 456). Embedded here is the idea of active reading: The students create new representations from an existing text and thereby expand the meaning of the original text. This concept of active reading can also be found in the following words of the National Reading Panel:

> Readers derive meaning from text when they engage in intentional, problem solving thinking processes. The data suggest that text comprehension is enhanced when readers actively relate the ideas represented in print to their own knowledge and experiences and construct mental representations in memory (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, p. 14).

However, when constructing a tableau, students go *beyond* individual mental representations of ideas in texts and embody *actual* representations of themes, ideas, and concepts.

Tableau: Showing What You Know

> "I think tableau helped because we could actually show what our main idea was."
>
> —Third-grade student

The importance of visualizing ideas in texts has been well documented as a comprehension strategy (McCallum & Moore, 1999; Onofrey & Theurer, 2007; Wilhelm, 1995), but as suggested earlier, tableau as an embodied form takes the visualizing of images further and makes them "concrete." This may have particular impact when dealing with more abstract texts, such as science information texts, and it says something about the uniqueness of drama as an agent of both abstract and concrete ideas (Byron, as cited in Wagner, 1998).

As tableau is a visual, nonverbal, and therefore nontraditional text, it also needs to be considered that the tool of tableau can provide an access point for students who struggle with a "disembodied school curriculum" (Smagorinsky, 2010, p. 128). Siegel (2006) writes about students who had been labeled as academic failures because their learning style did not flourish in a "verbocentric" curriculum. Yet when given the chance to evidence literacy through alternative modes, their identities as "literate people" were "transformed" (p. 69). And as Wilson (2003) points out, "For children with language difficulties, talking or writing about what they know is difficult. It is easier to show what they know through tableau" (p. 376). In addition, a focus on tableau as a visual mode of communicating makes it an inclusive practice for students who may be reticent to express themselves verbally. According to teachers who had used drama with English language learners, the opportunity to "physicalize" language impacted their vocabulary acquisition (Brouillette, 2013), which suggests the important role of the body in acquiring what many would assume as "head knowledge."

Tortello (2004) notes that the collaborative aspect of tableau also assists students who may "feel less anxious about taking part in a silent group activity than about interpreting the book orally on their own in front of the class" (p. 207). In my experience as a former elementary teacher, some of the shy students didn't merely tolerate being in a drama activity—they were often the ones who flourished when given the opportunity to exhibit an alternative way of being in the world.

Tableau as a Response to Close Reading

Although the term "close reading" is not used in the Common Core State Standards, it has become synonymous with a reading response that is framed in the standards as privileging authorial intent over reader interpretation. However, when Douglas Fisher was asked to describe in an interview what close reading meant, he responded, "Getting what the author had to say and bringing some of your own ideas to bear on that text" (McGraw-Hill Education, 2012). When close reading is positioned as an intersection between authorial intent and background knowledge, a legitimate space is created for the inclusion of tableau in literacy lessons. Gallagher, Ntelioglou, and Wessels (2013) make a case for drama as uniquely accommodating ideas that students bring to the classroom: "The extraordinary thing about the drama class is that life beyond the walls of the school matters;

"A focus on tableau as a visual mode of communicating makes it an inclusive practice for students who may be reticent to express themselves verbally."

it matters in a way that is unlike most other classrooms" (p. 8). When describing first- and second-grade tableaux that were based on picture books, Wilson (2003) writes, "Each performer drew on his or her understandings from life experiences and negotiated an overall interpretation for the tableau with others" (p. 380). This observation fits with Fisher's description of close reading because the students synthesized ideas from the picture books with their own lived experiences. Further in the interview, Fisher describes the dynamics of close reading in the classroom: "When we have students really read carefully, they pay attention to the words, the ideas, the structure, the flow, and the purpose of that text" (McGraw-Hill Education, 2012). If we replace *words* with *gestures*, all the elements that Fisher lists can be included as items to "read carefully" when viewing a tableau. When I ask students to comment on a tableau created by their peers, I encourage them to justify their interpretations based on what they actually see, which is an approach very similar to that endorsed in the Common Core State Standards for English language arts: "Students will be challenged and asked questions that push them to refer back to what they've read" (National Governors Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Although intended for the viewing of artwork, I have found that the

> *"I encourage [students] to justify their interpretations based on what they actually see."*

following three "visible thinking" questions from Harvard's Project Zero apply to a "reading" of a tableau:

- What do you **see**?
- What do you **think** about that?
- What does it make you **wonder**?

The first question calls for a close reading of the tableau, whereas the other two questions are more reader response–type prompts. However, the content of the tableau remains the focus for all three questions because students are asked to base their interpretations on the "evidence" they see before them (for more information on visible thinking, see www.visiblethinkingpz. org/VisibleThinking_html_files/03_ThinkingRoutines/03c_Core_routines/SeeThinkWonder/SeeThinkWonder_Routine.html).

More recently, Fisher and Frey (2014) have commented on the importance of motivating close reading through having a clearly defined purpose: "Close reading should result in something" (p. 225). They suggest that students may "want to present their ideas to other people" (p. 225), and in the next part of this article, I describe a study that gave students the opportunity to create and present tableaux as a result of reading informational texts.

Tableau and Main Idea

In the spring of 2014, I conducted a series of lessons in a third-grade classroom that required students to create tableaux as representations of main ideas in informational texts about the Earth and the solar system. In preparing to teach these lessons, I had reviewed the Common Core State Standards for the reading of informational texts and noticed that the skill of identifying the main idea was a consistent benchmark throughout the reading standards. As I considered the importance of this

objective, I realized the connection between *main idea* as a literacy concept and tableau as an art form. A main idea summarizes what is essential in a text, and a tableau presents the essence of an idea or experience. O'Neill (1995) offers this view of tableau:

> The image arrests and detains us and commands our attention and interpretation. There is more in the tableau than a mere suspension of time. The "perfect instant" of tableau is both totally concrete and totally abstract. In it we can read at a single glance the present, the past and the future—in other words the complete meaning of the represented action. (p. 127)

With a belief in tableau as an innovative approach to representing main ideas in informational texts, I based a series of lessons around the following structure:

- I read a passage of informational text to the class of third-grade students.
- The students worked in groups to reread the text, decide on the main idea, and practice a tableau that represented the main idea.
- The students presented their tableau representations to each other.

Fisher and Frey (2014) have defined close reading as "a careful and purposeful rereading of a complex text" (p. 223), and when tableau is framed as a representation of text, the act of rereading text becomes an important precursor to creating a tableau. In one of the sessions, a group of students was debating the meaning of the text in order to create a tableau of the main idea. After several students had offered their ideas, a group member suggested, "Let's read it and see what it's actually saying." Without knowing it, she was activating a collective close reading approach that arose out of the purpose of creating a tableau.

Figure 1   Third-Grade Student Tableau Showing Gravitational Pull Between the Sun and the Earth

another example, shown in Figure 2, students positioned themselves much closer and used hand and arm gestures to communicate the transmission of heat energy from the sun to the Earth. The student at the back of the tableau used an expansive posture in her role as the powerful sun, the two students in front of her used their arms and legs as conduits of the sun's energy, and the student at the front of the tableau was in role as the Earth receiving the heat energy. As the instructor, I viewed this tableau as embodied evidence that the students had understood the main idea of the informational text. If used as an assessment activity, tableau has the affordance of being an authentic assessment practice that is engaging for both students and teachers.

Tableau and Comprehension

As the instructor, I was very interested to know if the students felt that the tableaux had helped them understand the main ideas in the

The study was effective in offering students an alternative form to quite literally interact with and represent informational texts. As creative responses that were based on texts, the tableaux combined theories of Rosenblatt's (1978) efferent and aesthetic reading. The students knew that the tableaux functioned as representations of the original text, but they also recognized that there was room for creative interpretation. Figure 1 shows a group of students presenting a main idea from a text about the gravitational force between the sun and the Earth. The student on the left of the photograph is the sun, the student in the middle is an energy wave, and the student on the right of the picture is "a guy running away from the sun" (in the student's own words) but unable to do so because of the sun's gravitational pull. To create this tableau, the students had to pay close attention to the meaning of the text and then respond to the text

through an embodied representation of key concepts using gestures, facial expressions, and spatial positioning. In

Figure 2   Tableau Showing Energy Transmitted From the Sun to the Earth

informational science texts. At the end of the study, they were asked to complete a survey that asked, "Did making a tableau help you understand the main idea of a science text?" Out of a class of 21 students, 16 students responded "yes," 2 students circled both "yes" and "no," 1 student wrote "sometimes," and 2 students responded "no." The students were also asked to write a sentence to further explain their yes or no answers. As I analyzed the responses, I found that the majority of positive answers attributed increased comprehension to the visual and active components of tableau. Here are some examples:

- "Yes, because we showed it."
- "Yes, we got to try to act it out."
- "Yes, it was a movie of the passage."
- "Yes, it helped me by acting out and that I felt I really was that thing."
- "Yes, I think it helped because we could actually show what our main idea was."
- "Yes, because it was an activity and I do best when I get to see what I'm supposed to be doing."
- "Yes, it was pictures of things in a text."

I believe these statements clearly testify to the cognitive value and experiential gain of embodying main ideas in a tableau. And with the hope that I have effectively communicated the affordances of tableau, I now offer suggestions for getting started with tableau in *your* classroom.

Getting Started With Tableau

Many teachers feel nervous about using drama in the classroom, but tableau is a great introduction for educators with little or no experience of including drama-based strategies in the curriculum. In this section, I list some ideas for getting started and then detail more specific ways to incorporate tableau as a literacy strategy.

Introducing Tableau

In the classroom, explain that tableau is a French word that means "painting." Show a painting that involves a scene of people in a variety of poses and expressing different emotions. One that I have used with older elementary students is *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* by Joseph Wright of Derby (1768). It is a very intense scene that depicts various characters and their emotions as they focus on a scientific experiment being conducted on a bird. After giving students time to study the painting, ask them questions such as "What do you see? What are the people doing? What do you think is happening in the painting?" After establishing a sense of the painting as communicating a story, ask more inferential types of questions that require the students to justify their answers; for example, "How are the people feeling, and how do you know?" Having the students explain their interpretations is a good lead into emphasizing that nobody in a painting (or a photograph) moves, but we are still able to perceive what is

"Placing a tableau 'in the round' affords each spectator a different view."

happening by "reading" the gestures and facial expressions of the people involved.

Following a time of discussion, provide an opportunity for the students to practice creating a tableau. I like to begin with dividing the class into two groups so that each group will have the opportunity to create a tableau and be the "audience" for the tableau of the other group. Any area of the classroom can be used to create tableau, but I prefer to clear a space in the middle so that the group that is watching gets a sense of the three-dimensional structure of a tableau. Placing a tableau "in the round" affords each spectator a different view of the content, and as Wilson (2003) observes, "When we look at tableau, we can look anywhere" (p. 381).

When selecting a theme for the practice tableaux, locations rather than themes can be the initial focus. The idea is that students have an experience of creating a tableau, so pick a theme that is familiar to most of the students. With elementary students, two favorites of mine are "the grocery store" and "the park." Beginning with one of these themes, have the students close their eyes and imagine the scene and the actions of the people in it. If you feel the class needs some side coaching, you can verbalize ideas as a prompt: "In a grocery store, I see a young child reaching for candy on a high shelf," or "I see a person in a hurry being blocked by the cart of someone talking on their cell phone."

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When you have given enough time for students to imagine the scene, begin to randomly call on individual students to strike a pose in the tableau space. Alternatively, students could indicate when they are ready to pose by raising their hands. Having students go up one at a time prevents a collective rush into the tableau space and provides an opportunity for the other half of the class to witness the slow creation of a tableau. If a student indicates that they don't know what to do, encourage them to watch others closely to see if they can make *narrative connections*. For example, if a student chooses to pose as a small child reaching for candy, somebody else may go and stand next to them in role as their parent.

As the students strike poses, remind them to find a pose that they can comfortably hold while the tableau is being created. When everyone in the group has joined in the tableau, I have found counting down to taking an actual photograph of the scene encourages absolute stillness. However, don't just take one picture; walk around and through the tableau, taking pictures of isolated gestures as well as wide-angle pictures. These pictures can be used later as you discuss with the students their embodied responses. Invite the spectating half of the class to join you as you walk around and through the tableau, and ask them to be attentive to the variety of poses and emotions being expressed. Younger children will need to be reminded not to touch any of the "statues." Have the participants remain in the tableau a little longer while you gather the spectators around the outside of the tableau. Ask them similar questions to those asked of the painting: "What do you see? What do you think is happening? What emotions are being expressed, and how do you know?" This final question directs attention to

individual gestures, facial expressions, and spacing between the characters. Let the tableau participants relax and draw them into the discussion by asking them to comment on the experience and the creative choices they made in forming their poses.

Once the students are familiar with the structure and format of a tableau (i.e., remaining still and silent), you can start to make more explicit connections with language arts themes and texts. The following are some of the ways that I have found tableau to be successful in a literacy context.

Tableau as an Interactive Read-Aloud

Before doing a read-aloud with tableau, the students need to be in groups of about four or five. The students can remain standing while they listen so that they are ready to "spring into action"; therefore, choose a short, preferably action-packed, story or section of a book. Explain to the students that the book will be read aloud, but at any point, you might stop and say, "Tableau!" When they hear this, the groups will have 10 seconds to form and hold still a tableau of the scene that was just read aloud. (You can be flexible with the time constraints, giving longer to begin with and then shortening the time as you progress). Be sure to pass comments on the tableaux that are created at each stopping point and how they relate to the action. Making positive comments about artistic variations between

tableaux affirms the idea that there is no right or wrong answer for how a scene is depicted. You can take time to ask participants to explain whom or what they are in the tableau, but try not to break the momentum of the embodied and interactive read-aloud experience.

I have found kindergartners through preservice teachers greatly enjoy this activity, and it certainly encourages active listening (Branscombe & Schneider, 2013). With older students, you can introduce interesting extensions once the read-aloud is complete. For example, if the read-aloud was a fairy tale, ask the students to create a tableau that shows an alternative ending or an event that happened 5 years, 10 years, or 20 years after the "happily ever after." You will be amazed at how humorous and insightful these tableaux can be, and the students have great fun creating them.

Tableau and Opportunities for Telling

Although the emphasis has been on tableau as a nonverbal expressive text, opportunities for verbalization can be built into tableau work. An articulated thought can add interest and further depth to a tableau presentation. If depicting a character from a book in a tableau, a gentle tap on the shoulder can serve as a prompt for a participant to express in role the thoughts or words of their character at that frozen moment. The choice of words often explains character motivation and adds extra layers
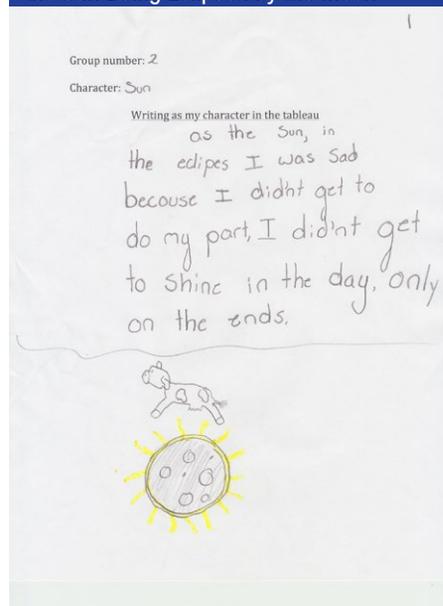
"Making positive comments about artistic variations between tableaux affirms the idea that there is no right or wrong answer for how a scene is depicted."

of content to the visual text. Downey (2005) speaks of this technique as "spotlighting a character": "Perhaps I touch the character on the shoulder and, while the rest of the image is still, this student steps forward and responds, in character, to my questions. I might simply ask: 'What are you feeling right now?'" (p. 36). Verbalizing thoughts and actions can be a lead into this next tableau extension activity.

Tableau and Opportunities for Writing

Tortello (2004) writes that tableaux can "offer a concrete reference to spark writing activities, as children can describe the scenarios depicted and draw on them to extend ideas about the book to be read or the one just finished" (p. 207). As frequently observed by teachers, students struggle to get started with writing because they "don't know what to write about." The experience of being in a tableau before writing can alleviate that compositional

Figure 4   Emotional Content in Writing Reveals Student Understanding of an Eclipse

Figure 3   Student Writing in Role as the Sun Being Eclipsed by the Moon
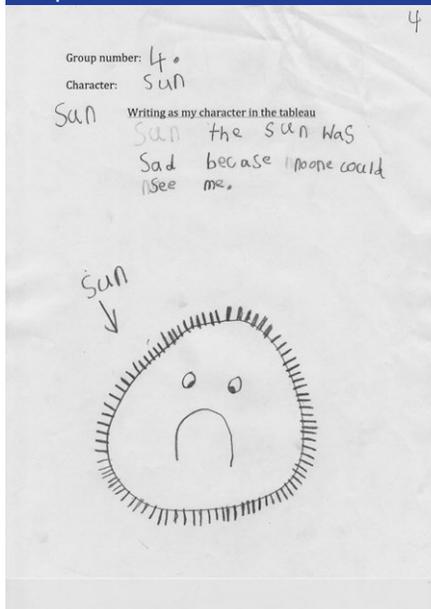
vacuum by giving students a base on which to build ideas. In addition, a tableau as a dramatic structure is made up of the same constituent parts that are considered vital for good story writing: a setting, characters, and a main event. After being in a tableau, students could write a detailed description of the setting, elaborate on the event being depicted, or write about a day in the life of one of the characters.

Writing from within a drama frame involves the development of multiple perspectives (Schneider & Jackson, 2000). In regards to tableau, writing in role involves composing from the perspective of the person (or object) students have depicted in the tableau, and if they did have the opportunity to step out and speak in role, they can incorporate these words into the writing. Figures 3 and 4 show examples of writing in role from third-grade students. After studying a science informational text about what happens when the sun is eclipsed, students who had both been

the sun in their respective tableaux wrote in role as the sun. The written responses provided insight into their understanding of a scientific process *as a result of* embodying the elements of that process. In summary, when used as a "pretext" for writing (O'Neill, 1995), a tableau provides a contextual basis for ideas and the provocation of imagination that results from being in a tableau leads to enhanced writing.

And Finally..

In concluding an article about embodiment and the strength of tableau as a "showing, not telling" alternative to verbocentric forms of teaching and learning, it seems appropriate to limit my final words and appeal instead that you *do* tableau and *see* for yourself its potential as a tool for learning.

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TAKE ACTION!

Here are a few resources that provide further information about using drama and tableau in the classroom.

- **Analyzing Tableau**

  A blog maintained by Indonesian student Jason Wirya has a very helpful entry (blogs.swa-jkt.com/swa/11002/2012/02/04/263/) that breaks down tableau as an art form and details how to use positioning and gesture both to analyze tableau and to create an effective image.

- **Tableau and Reading Comprehension**

  A Dramatic Approach to Reading Comprehension: Strategies and Activities for Classroom Teachers by Lenore Blank Kelner and Rosalind M. Flynn is a great resource for classroom teachers who want to know more about the use of drama to teach reading comprehension. There is a chapter on tableau and the ways it can enhance comprehension of texts. Ideas for linking tableau to assessment practices are also provided. In addition, author Rosalind Flynn's website (www.rosalindflynn.com) gives further information for using drama in the classroom.

- **Drama Integration**

  A drama-based instruction website hosted by the University of Texas (www.utexas.edu/cofa/dbi/) provides wonderful ideas for getting started with integrating drama into the general curriculum. There are links to videos and lesson plans that break down instruction into very helpful steps for teachers who have little to no experience of drama in the classroom. This comes highly recommended!