

Advocating for Abolition: Staging an Abolitionist Society Convention

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What do our students remember about their 8th grade study of American history? Invariably they tell us that it is the historical simulations and the roles they played in them that stick in their memories, and vividly so. Other teachers across America have had similar successes implementing role-plays, and possibly some similar misgivings to ours; students often feel uncomfortable advocating for causes they find deeply offensive, such as the rights of monarchy or slaveholders. Of course, these role-plays have an important place in the curriculum; to understand the controversies of antebellum America, students must re-imagine them from all sides.

But is there a way to set up a role-play in which all students are on the right side of history? To solve this dilemma Andy Robinson developed the idea for a simulation of an Abolitionist Society Convention. By the 1850s, public spokespersons in favor of the immediate abolition of slavery included white men *and* women, as well as African Americans of both genders born enslaved *and* free. Finally students could role-play a truly diverse cast of characters working together for a common purpose.

What the Abolitionist Society Convention allows students to see is that the most complex and nuanced debates in American history are not between those for and against social change, but among those who agree on the goal but disagree on the speed, scope, manner, and mode of change. Some abolitionists were pacifists, while others supported violence, some wanted the free states to withdraw from the Union, while others believed in running anti-slavery candidates for Congress, some supported giving women leadership roles in the

anti-slavery societies, while others thought this step so radical that it would dissuade people from joining the movement. As we saw with our national debate over health care reform, the devil, so to speak, lies in the details of *how* a movement should progress. The simulation Andy designed, and that Joan Brodsky Schur later implemented and further developed, puts students in the shoes of people who knew where they wanted to travel, but not the route, the pace, or the style of footwear.

Contextualizing of the Abolitionist Movement: Setting the Scene

In our simulation, we did not attempt to recreate any one particular meeting held by abolitionists in history, but rather to stage a hypothetical one *that could have taken place*, based on real ones that did. We chose to stage ours in the mid-1850s so that the context included more events leading up to the Civil War, and so that the use of violence, anathema to the Quakers and Garrisonians (those led by William Lloyd Garrison) became a more hotly debated topic.

In order for students to understand how reviled the abolitionists were in their own day, they need to know about the forces that were arrayed against them. Even those who supported the eventual end of slavery believed that the fiery rhetoric of the abolitionists would create a backlash counterproductive to their goals. In effect, the abolitionists challenged the political, economic, social, and religious status quo of Antebellum America. Abolitionists struck at the heart of the U.S. Constitution itself, which included in its original version a Fugitive Slave Clause (Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3). From those who made money by growing cotton in the South, to the mill owners processing it in the North, many feared that the abolitionist cause threatened the prosperity of the entire nation. Nineteenth-century social hierarchies were also turned topsy-turvy when African Americans and women rose to speak at abolitionist meetings; both the subservience of slaves and women were often justified on the basis of biblical interpretation.

The Quakers, with their belief in the Testimony of Equality and the Inner Light, were the exception. The Second Great Awakening and Quakerism provided the impetus behind the abolitionist movement, and the language and metaphor of the Bible were the medium of discourse. Just as today, religion can be a galvanizing factor in politics, so it was during the first half of the nineteenth century. Missing this key dimension of



Students at the Village Community School meet to fill in their Ally Grids and find like-minded abolitionists before the formal meeting begins, spring 2010. (Photo by Joan Brodsky Schur)



Students created the brochures displayed here using online photographs and other primary-source documents. (Photo by Joan Brodsky Schur)

the debate will rob the simulation and the characters of the root of their passion. Conversion from sin and from slavery seemed to go hand in hand, and abolitionist conventions took on the fervor and organization of revival meetings. The message of equality before God lent credence to the abolitionist movement, and led to a coalition between black and white abolitionists.

Choosing the Cast of Characters

Understanding the historical context of the movement helps students to build empathy and admiration for the abolitionist he or she will role-play at the convention. All the abolitionists on our list (see page 181) are easy to research on the web, where their photographs attest to their dignity and sense of purpose. We wanted to make certain that a wide array of voices would be heard—life-stories ranging from those born to privilege to those escaping slavery. The substantial number of Quaker abolitionists assured that pacifism would have strong advo-

cates. We also chose to include members of the “Secret Six,” who supported John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry. While the Garrisonians refused to engage in the American political system, others on the list were founding members of the Liberty Party. Many, but by no means all, subjects also supported the women’s movement, an offshoot of the abolitionist movement itself. When Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, they and other women were refused seats. Thereafter, they pledged to return to America to fight for the equal rights of women. The number of married couples in the abolitionist movement attests to the fact that some believed that the quest for emancipation could move forward on all fronts simultaneously, and gives some of your students the opportunity to role-play husband and wife.

We did not include on our list of abolitionists those who were not living in the mid-1850s. For example, African

American David Walker initiated the movement in 1829 with his *Appeal* but he died in 1830.

Establishing the Agenda

Abolitionists utilized (and debated the efficacy of) many strategies: Which were *most* effective based on what evidence? Were all of these strategies morally justifiable, and if so, on what grounds? A brief survey of the movement yields this list of strategies to debate at the convention:

- Support the American Colonization Society, which advocated helping African Americans “return” to Africa;
- Plan boycotts of the products of slave labor such as Southern cotton and sugar;
- Win hearts and minds through the writing of fiction and reportage;
- Speak on the lecture circuit and other public forums;
- Advocate that the freeing of the slave and the emancipation of American women are one and the

same struggle to establish equality in America;

- Form political parties and run candidates to elected office;
- Help runaway slaves to escape, the work of “vigilance committees”;
- Work through the churches of America’s major religious denominations;
- Gather names on anti-slavery petitions and send them to Congress;
- Refuse to pay taxes to the government;
- Advocate that the North withdraw from the Union on the basis that the Constitution itself supported slavery;
- Encourage slave uprisings;
- Advocate the use of armed violence.

A classroom simulation that addressed all of these issues would take more time than most teachers could devote to it, therefore it pays to narrow down the agenda to a few key issues. In Joan’s simulation the class debated the following proposals in one class period using parliamentary procedure.

How your convention plays out will depend on the agenda you set up and how your students interact. In Joan’s class, all but the last two proposals of the agenda passed. In one of Andy’s classes, the first proposal on the table was whether or not to empower women with roles within the Abolitionist Society. When the majority of men voted “nay,” the women walked out. Andy then had to improvise a solution on the spot with his class: the girls set up a separate Female Abolitionist Society, and the two organizations held separate meetings.

Agenda of the Meeting of the Abolitionist Society

Meeting of April 2, 1855 in New York City

- Reading of the Agenda.
- Consideration of a proposal to create a political party that shall run candidates advocating the immediate abolition of slavery throughout these States.
- Consideration of a proposal that we support a movement sponsored by one Henry David Thoreau to cease paying our taxes to this Government of Slave Owners, even if we must go to jail as a consequence.
- Consideration of a proposal that our organization fight for the emancipation of the enslaved—Negro and Women—with equal vigor and immediacy.
- Consideration of a proposal that the Northern free states secede from the Union because the U.S. Constitution has been from its inception a pro-slavery document.
- Consideration of a proposal sent to us in secret by a free Negro who is currently planning to seize a federal arsenal in an unspecified border state by armed force. His intentions are to create a general slave uprising within that state which will free that state. He wishes to know if we will:
(A) Send him money to aid his cause.
(B) Send him men among you ready to fight.
- After consideration of these proposals and a vote on the same, the meeting shall be adjourned.

Assignment One

Finding Out About Your Role in the Abolitionist Movement

You will be assigned one of the leaders of the abolitionist movement to research for our upcoming Abolitionist Society Convention. All the information that you gather will help you when you portray the abolitionist in the drama of the Convention. All information about your abolitionist will help you to create your character; the more anecdotes you can learn to share, the fuller your portrayal of your role.

You must seek out answers to the following questions and take notes on the information you find.

1. Describe your upbringing and how it relates to how and why you became an abolitionist. Where were you born (North or South)? What was your social status at birth (enslaved, free, upper class etc.)?
2. Describe your education and religious tradition as they relate to your fight against slavery.
3. By what primary means did you work for the cause? What other strategies did you support?
4. For which publications did you write, publish, or contribute?
5. What anti-slavery organizations did you found or work for?
6. What difficulties did you face from *outside* the movement (heckling, social isolation, violence, etc.)?
7. What difficulties did you face *within* the movement (disagreements, leadership style)?
8. What kind of impact did you make on ending slavery, or people’s opinions about the imperative to end slavery?
9. What other reforms or movements did you support (temperance, women’s rights, public education, etc.)?
10. Look at the list of other abolitionists in our class. Do any of them figure in your biography? When and where did you encounter them? Did you agree with them at all times or did you part ways on certain issues?

Student Assignments: Preparing to Role-Play

Role-plays can fall flat if students do not invest in their roles. To speak in another's voice, students need to feel confident about who they are and the ideas they represent. For this reason, a good role-play often takes more time to prepare than to enact. We found students excited to complete the assignments because they knew the information they gathered would be useful and publicly shared with other students.

Getting to Know the Cast of Characters

There are many ways for fellow abolitionists to get to know one another before the Convention starts. Distribute the Ally Grid (see below) as students listen to brief oral reports from their classmates and/or read each other's brochures. Students can then check off relevant information about their cohorts and begin to make allies with those who share their views about the best means to end slavery.

You can also hold an informal "reunion tea party" before the formal proceedings begin. Abolitionists were a "networked" community with hubs of activity spreading from East Coast cities out to Oberlin College in Ohio. Work on the Underground Railroad alone necessitated this. You can model the tea party on a high school or college reunion by posting banners marked: "Lane Seminary Graduates Meet Here," "Seneca Falls Convention Attendees Reunite Here," "Liberty Party Rally," and so forth. Inviting other teachers to be among the visitors can help to raise the level of discourse as teachers pose questions that students need to answer based on their research.

Adding Drama to the Convention Itself

The Conventions we held lasted one class period (50 minutes). They were dignified proceedings run according to parliamentary rules of order. This does not mean that they lacked drama!

Assignment Two

The Self-Assessment Reference Guide

This Reference Guide is designed to help you to keep track of how your abolitionist felt about the use of various tactics in the abolitionist movement. As you read about your abolitionist, fill out the information you gather on this grid. State your abolitionist's opinion about each tactic, his or her justification for or against the tactic, and an example of how "you" used it.

Self-Assessment Reference Guide

Tactic	Your opinion	By what rationale or justification	An example of your use of this means
Writing (journalism, fiction, poetry)			
Oratory			
Political Action (legal appeals, legislative measures)			
Working within mainstream religious institutions			
Boycotting products of slave labor			
Breaking the Law			
Violence (against property and persons)			
Killing			
Attitude Towards Race and Gender (support of mixed meetings, fighting both causes)			

As chair of the Convention, the teacher can role-play a prominent abolitionist such as Frederick Douglass or William Lloyd Garrison, calling the meeting to order and initiating debate. Thus the teacher can be immersed in the drama while retaining his or her control of the classroom. The use of a prop or costume is recommended because it signifies to students when the teacher is in and out

of role; a hat donned, a gavel rapped on a table, these become theatrical cues that indicate "We are now in role; the drama has begun." Encourage students to add rhetorical flourishes to their speeches by studying those of the great orators of the nineteenth century, such as Sojourner Truth, Angelina Grimke, Daniel Webster and others.¹ Some of our students surprised both themselves and their

Assignment Three

The Pamphlet

Now use the information that you gathered to create a brochure that your abolitionist might have written advocating for the abolition of slavery. By writing it in the first-person you will begin to inhabit your role and find your voice even before the simulation begins. Once your pamphlet is finished, it will be photocopied and distributed (or posted online) so that all the other abolitionists in our class can read it. You, in turn, will use everyone else's pamphlets to get to know the other figures in the movement and to gather information about who agrees with you on key issues.

Your pamphlet should:

- Include an autobiographical sketch of who you are.
- Use an actual photograph or portrait of your figure either downloaded from the web or drawn by hand.
- Distill the essence of the argument you made against slavery.
- Be written in “your” voice (as reflected in the historical record and/or any primary sources you can find written by your abolitionist).
- Use the language of the day in terms of vocabulary, rhetorical flourish, etc.
- Include a primary source quotation of the actual words “you” wrote about slavery.
- Use other illustrations and quotations that will be persuasive to your audience.

The Ally Grid

Abolitionist's Views	Writing	Oratory	Religious Institutions	Political Action	Breaking Law	Violence	Killing	Attitude Towards Race and Gender
Robert Purvis								
Sarah Grimke								
Frederick Douglass								
Etc.								

Webography on Abolition

- A Brief History of the American Abolitionist Movement, Indiana University-Purdue University, <http://americanabolitionist.liberalarts.iupui.edu/brief.htm>
- Africans in America, PBS, www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html
- Famous Trials (The Trial of John Brown), Doug Linder, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/ftrials.htm
- I Will Be Heard: Abolitionism in America, Cornell University, <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/abolitionism/>
- Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection, Cornell University, <http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu:80/m/mayantislavery/>
- The African American Mosaic, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam005.html
- Thus Far By Faith, PBS, www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/
- Timeline of Abolition Digital History, www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/daybyday/daybyday.cfm?db=abolition
- Women and Social Movements in the United States 1600-2000, Alexander Street Press, <http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/projectmap.htm>

Books on Process Drama

Process Drama and Multiple Literacies: Addressing Social, Cultural, and Ethical Issues by Jenifer Jasinski Schneider, Thomas P. Crumpler, and Theresa Rogers, Heinemann Drama, 2006

Drama Classroom: Action, Reflection, Transformation by Philip Taylor, RoutledgeFalmer, 2000

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classmates by their vivid and impassioned speechifying. Students can prepare speeches or speak extemporaneously.

Up the emotional ante of the proceedings by distributing primary source anti-abolitionist flyers to participants as the meeting opens or by inviting teachers or members of another class to heckle the Convention and “disrupt” the meeting. You can also interrupt the proceedings with news bulletins delivered by telegraph, such as the recapture of an escaped slave, the results of a court case, or election results.

Follow-Up and Follow-Through in American History

It’s essential to take the next day and reflect with the students on what happened in the simulation, scaffolding the process and helping them to see the deeper meaning behind their debates. The simulation is an experience in doing situational ethics, and the learning can be immensely transferable. What were the key points of disagreement between abolitionists? What accounted for the difference of opinion on key issues? What role did background (region, race, religion, and gender) have? What feelings did these factors elicit in students? Help the students identify the more abstract questions that relate to American history, like “Is it moral to use an immoral act (e.g. violence) to fight an immoral system?”

We found that a study of the abolitionist movement helps students to understand subsequent struggles to achieve social justice in America. Conflicting priorities between the fight for racial justice and gender equality re-emerged during the struggle to pass the Nineteenth Amendment, when white women pushed their own agenda at the expense of fighting segregation. The women’s rights movement of the 1960s emerged from the civil rights movement, when women found (much as they did in antebellum America) that they could not be effective advocates for others if they lacked equal rights themselves. Like the

abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement was inspired by religion and torn between factions dedicated to non-violence and those willing to encourage violent confrontation. We can see how the movement for lesbian and gay rights causes controversy in our society today, and how that movement makes great strides while also facing setbacks on its path to social justice. 🏳️

Note

1. See “Speeches as Primary Source Documents” in *Eyewitness to the Past: Strategies for Teaching American History in Grades 5-12*, by Joan Brodsky Schur (Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Press, 2007), 140-148.

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Our thanks to Christina Pelekanos and Jared Williams who implemented the Abolitionist Society Convention in their eighth grade classrooms and gave us useful suggestions and feedback.

List of Abolitionists to Role-Play

Gamaliel Bailey (1807–1859)
James Gillespie Birney (1792–1857)
William Wells Brown (c. 1814–1884)
John Brown (1800–1859)
Maria Weston Chapman (1806–1885)
Salmon Portland Chase (1808–1873)
Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880)
Samuel Eli Cornish (1795–1858)
Frederick Douglass (c. 1818–1895)
William Lloyd Garrison (1805–79)
Henry Highland Garnett (1815–1882)
William Goodell (1792–1878)
Sarah Grimke (1792–1873)
Angelina Grimke (1805–1879)
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911)
Lewis Hayden (1816–1889)
Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823–1911)
Abby Kelley (1811–1887)
Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793–1880)
James Mott (1788–1868)
Theodore Parker (1810–1860)
Wendell Phillips (1811-1884)
Robert Purvis (1810–1898)
Harriet Forten Purvis (1810–1875)
Charles Lenox Remond (1810–1873)
Franklin Sanborn (1831–1917)
Gerrit Smith (1797–1874)
Henry Brewster Stanton (1805–1887)
Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902)
Maria W. Stewart (1803–1879)
Lucy Stone (1818–1893)
Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896)
George Luther Stearns (1809–1867)
Lewis Tappan (1788–1873)
Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)
Harriet Tubman (1822–1913)
Sojourner Truth (1797–1883)
Theodore Dwight Weld (1803–1895)