

*Escape to Freedom along the 'Underground Railroad', a Sample Lesson
for Fifth and Sixth Classes by Dave Flynn*

The **Underground Railroad** was a network of secret routes and safe houses used by 19th-century slaves of African descent in the United States to escape to Free states and Canada with the aid of abolitionists and allies who were sympathetic to their cause. **Harriet Tubman**, a character in this drama, was an African-American born into slavery. Tubman escaped and subsequently made about thirteen missions to rescue approximately seventy enslaved family and friends.

For the purpose of this drama I have created two fictional characters Jacob and Emily – depending whether the teacher is male or female.

*This is **not** a stand-alone lesson. It holds the potential to deepen the learning in such curricular areas as human rights, US Civil War, American history etc. At the very least a brief history of the US Civil War and slavery is advised before undertaking this drama lesson.*

Duration: 40 Minutes [this lesson is best delivered first class in the morning or after a lunch break]

Resources:

- A number of small blankets or jackets.
- A set of old coal sacks (x2)
- Two short letters from Harriet
- A rope or long ribbon.
- *Doctor Who* theme music.
- A costume piece for being in role as Harriet's friend e.g. a cap or a shawl
- Old maps of the USA
- Picture of Harriet

Note: the above materials are not essential; however, they could aid the overall aesthetic of the drama performance.

Objectives:

1. To engage the child in *an experience* of the 'Underground Railroad'.
2. To facilitate the child in role as Harriet's helper to develop their understanding of the dangers a slave may face on the 'Underground Railroad'.

Stimulus:

Children walk into the classroom; all desks and chairs have been pushed back. The classroom has been set up as follows: piles of old empty coal bags placed in two areas of the room (to suggest safe houses), a stack of blankets/ jackets (to suggest a wagon), at the far end of the classroom, two chairs should be placed apart with a rope or a ribbon linking them (to suggest the border to freedom).

Note: if children are not used to this approach to drama it has the potential to play on their curiosity and engagement should follow.

Introduction: (building context)

The children are instructed to huddle together in the middle of the room. The teacher informs the children that he/she has found and unlocked the codes to a time machine. The children are invited to step inside the time machine. The children are asked to close their eyes. *Doctor Who* theme music is played in the background and the children are told 'the machine is beginning to take flight'. The children are encouraged to move slightly as 'the journey is bumpy'. The teacher can supplementary build context with 'we are almost there', 'did you feel the sudden thud? That means we have arrived'.

*Note: to further build **context** the teacher could ask the children to 'squeeze into the machine' and make statements such as 'I think there is room for one more' etc.*

First embodiment: (teacher in role)

The teacher informs the children that he/she will need to stay with the time machine to keep it safe in order to get back to 2014. Taking a look outside the time machine the teacher informs the children that 'the coast is clear' and that 'a friend' is to meet them momentarily. Placing a cap or shawl on, the **teacher in role** introduces himself/herself to the class as Jacob or Emily. Instructing the children to 'keep quiet, I have heard there are people that do not support our cause about', Jacob brings the children to the first *safe house* and informs the children that 'the year is 1885 and you have landed in the southern states of America'. Old maps of the USA that have been left at the first safe house can be given to the children. The children are asked to locate the state of Maryland and discuss its location e.g. other states that border it etc. The children will be asked to recall what they already know about the Northern and Southern US states [assuming a lesson has already been undertaken].

The children are introduced to the *Underground Railroad*.

Possible information to include: the escape network was not literally underground or a railroad. It was figuratively "underground" in the sense of being an underground resistance. The Underground Railroad consisted of meeting points, secret routes, transportation, and safe houses, and personal assistance provided by abolitionist sympathisers. Participants generally organised in small, independent groups; this helped to maintain secrecy because individuals knew some connecting "stations" along the route but knew few details of their immediate area.

Harriet Tubman is then introduced. Jacob holds up a picture and gives a brief background to her story.

Possible information to include: Harriet Tubman was born around 1822 in Maryland. She was one of the most successful African-American abolitionists and humanitarians. Although she was born into slavery, Tubman escaped and made about thirteen missions to rescue approximately seventy enslaved family and friends. She used this very railroad that we are going to visit today.

Jacob then informs the children that Harriet needs our help and has hid a letter somewhere in the safe house (under the coal sacks). A child is asked to search for the letter and to read it to the group.

Sample Letter:

Dear Trusted Friends,

I hope this letter finds you well. Welcome to safe house No. 1. I need you to undertake a journey along the Underground Railroad. My friend Jacob should be with you. He is a conductor; this means he knows where the safe houses are along this section of the railroad. This journey can be dangerous, slaves travel along this railroad by night. The safe houses are often between 15km– 30km apart. The slaves stop at the safe houses during the day and rest. The safe houses are often located in barns, under church floors, or in hiding places in caves and hollowed-out riverbanks.

I want you to bring food and blankets to safe house No. 2. I understand a family of slaves have escaped and are making their way to the safe house tonight. Jacob knows the way.

There is a wagon waiting outside with all of the provisions you need.

Please be careful and do as Jacob asks.

Your friend,

Harriet

Second embodiment: (development)

Jacob reminds the children that this is dangerous journey. He asks the children ‘can we be a responsible team for, Harriet?’ and ‘are we ready to undertake this journey?’ Jacob looks outside the door, suggesting the coast is again clear he requests the children to step on board the waggon. Jacob informs the children that the road is bumpy and begins to bob and bounce slightly in the waggon. Jacob can use this time to ask some of the children who they are and where they are from.

Note: to add tension, as one of the children is talking, Jacob could cut across the child stating ‘do you hear that? I think there is another wagon close by, we must travel faster!’

Jacob and the children reach safe house no. 2. Jacob and the class once again go inside. A child is asked to find a letter and to read it to the group.

Sample Letter:

Dear Trusted Friends,

Well done on getting to safe house No. 2. I hope this letter finds you well. Please leave the supplies for my friends. I have one more task for you. I hope you will help Jacob one more time before returning to your home. Jacob needs to make sure the border is safe to cross. We have created a small tunnel and we must make sure it has not been found.

I understand this is very dangerous, however, Jacob has done this many times and with him you will be safe.

Please listen carefully to Jacob.

Your friend,

Harriet

Jacob asks the group to return to wagon. Jacob can use this time to ask questions (whilst always on the outlook and in role) such as 'what dangers would the slaves encounter on this part of the trip?' 'Who could be patrolling the border to make sure they cannot escape?'

Once the group arrive at the border they must assess the situation. Jacob can ask 'is there any evidence to suggest the tunnel has been found?'

The children are then given time to discuss in pairs whether the journey is worth undertaking or not. The children are asked to come up with a number of reasons for the slaves to cross the border and a number of reasons for the slaves not to cross the border. The children then vote when Jacob asks 'should I inform the family to proceed on this journey later tonight?'

Conclusion

Jacob thanks the group for their help and support and returns them to the time machine. The teacher steps out of role and welcomes them back to the time machine. The teacher asks the children to explain what happened while they were away. The children are informed they will be returning to 2014. The children repeat the digits, 2, 0, 1, 4 a number of times. The introduction process is repeated. *Doctor Who* theme music is played and the children return to the classroom.

Possible Follow Up Activity

The children welcome Flam or Dee (teacher in role as slave) that has taken the journey along the Underground Railway. Flam/Dee will step out from the time machine and he/she will be **hot seated**. The children will ask the Flam/Dee a number of questions (some of these may have been prepared earlier).

Note: Perhaps, the teacher may wish to explain that "true freedom" was not achieved straight away. Often African-Americans were not educated, they could not read or write. African-Americans found it difficult to get a job in the northern states and generate money etc. This information could be developed through Flam or Dee's stories during the hot seat session.

Extra Note: This lesson could also be delivered with the task of bringing a slave to freedom. A colleague could join the group (in role as a slave) at safe house No1. The children could then accompany the slave on their journey across the border to freedom. However, I do not feel this should be undertaken without an adult in role as Jacob or Emily.