Life in the Tenements

A Drama Scheme to unlock life at the time of 1916
by Sarah FitzGibbon

Drama scheme linking Drama with History (the context for the 1913 Lockout and the 1916 Easter Rising), SPHE (The Rights of the Child) and English.

Session 1

(Please note that this session is to build the context for the Rising)

Duration: 1 hour

Materials required:
- Cleared desks
- 3 sheets of paper
- The Royal Society of Antiquarians Ireland slideshow from the Me Mollser website.
- Any resource history material you wish them to use from the History Curriculum.
- I also recommend [www.census.nationalarchive.ie/exhibition/dublin/poverty_health.html](http://www.census.nationalarchive.ie/exhibition/dublin/poverty_health.html)

Step 1

Ask the class what do human beings need to survive and thrive. Collect their answers on a list. This will be referred to later as the Survival Sheet.

Step 2

Explain to the class that you wish to explore life in a Dublin Tenement about 100 years ago. Just gather their initial thoughts about what Dublin would have been like 100 years ago?

Step 3

Show them the section from the National Archive site listed above to illustrate the development of the tenements and the density of population. It is worth pointing out the list of professions among the tenement dwellers. To illustrate the living conditions show them the RASI slideshow, taking time to fully appreciate the interior images for clues to how people ate, slept, toiletted, cooked and washed.
Step 4

Divide the class into groups of 5. Please bear in mind they will be in these groups for some weeks. Inform the group that for the next few sessions, they will creating a family from the tenements around 1915. Give each group a sheet of paper to record the following:

Their names

On the other side of the page ask them to record the name of their created family and the roles that the members of the group will play in that family:

In each family there should be a

• Father
• Mother
• Grandparent – a person who still takes an active part in family life
• One 16 year old
• Any remaining children should be over the age of 8
• If you feel the group can manage it, you can use a prop baby.

Each member of the group must give their character a name. Allow each group to record their family’s information.

Step 5

As a family group they must decide who is responsible for the following:

• Who fetches the coal?
• Who fetches the water?
• Who works? At what?
• Who washes the clothes?
• Who cooks the dinner?
• Who minds the money?
• Who tidies the tenement?
• Who empties the chamber pot?

Keep a record of all of these for use in the next session.

Suggested activity

Use the information gathered, the images and extracts that the family outlines together with the survival sheet, to create a collage for the project.
Session 2

(Please note that this session is to build the context for the Rising)

Duration: 1 hour

Materials required:

- Your collage
- A cleared classroom/ hall
- Lots of masking tape
- Metre stick
- A camera
- The RSAI Slideshow

Please note: there is a degree of classroom and equipment preparation required for this session

Step 1

Inform the class that you are about to measure out the tenements. Show them the interior shots again. Ask them to list the common features in the rooms i.e. fire places; windows and a bed. Ask them about how a family might decorate their place. Give them their family information sheets to refer back to.

Step 2

As every classroom is different, you can guage yourself how much space you allocate to each family. I would suggest that that you create a grid with 6 boxes about 1 metre by 2 metres. If you have access to a larger room that is fine but the main object of the exercise is to allow the class experience a simulation of the lack of personal space, privacy, poor hygiene but also the sense of community that came with life in a tenement. Each family can have one space each and the final space is a communal space like the entrance hall. Mark out the door and the front steps.

Mark out the spaces with masking tape.

Step 3

Allocate a space to each family. Allow them to decide where elements of the room are, such as the fireplace and the door. Decide whether they have a curtain for privacy and where it might be. Where does everybody sleep?

I found it useful for them to mark theses with more tape.

Once you feel that there is consensus within each family, move to the next step.
Step 4

Tell the families that using the information they have about their family’s life and their tenement room, you wish to create a ‘stop animation’ or sequence of picture of tenement life over a 24 hour period. In preparation for this, you would like each family within the tenement to create a series of frozen images of the tenement at different points of the day.

Remind them that some people welcomed others into their space while others did not. Also, say that if a character leaves the tenement during the day for work or occupation, the student playing that character should just sit to the side and wait for their time to re-enter. It is important to check in with these students about where they are working and what they are doing.

Tell them that you will go through these images once in order to practice before you will use your camera.

Call out the following times if day and allow them to create their images:

- Dawn about 6 o’clock
- 10 o’clock
- 1 o’clock

Put in a break here for further conversation and exploration. If you feel the group can carry on straight through; but I found that the action got too ‘high’ and focus started to disipate.

- 4 o’clock
- 6 o’clock – the angelus
- 8 o’clock
- midnight

Step 5

Giving the group a count of ten to get from one image to the next start the day at 6am and work your way through the images for the last time, photographing each one as you go. I find it helps to remind them about their facial expressions before you start.

Step 6

Once done ask the pupils what they discovered about life in the tenement from the exercise. Ask them if there are things that we miss by living the way we do now from the way we did then?

Step 7

Ask them to fill in any new facts about the families that they discovered during this session, e.g. who was working and at what? Where was the family’s money coming from?

Suggested activity

Create a slide show of the images in sequence to see the day in the life of the tenement.
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Session 3

Duration: 1 hour

Please note:
A version of this exercise will be used in the preshow workshop for Me Mollser. If you are receiving this performance piece, please skip to session 4.

Materials required:
Masking tape and a cleared classroom or give each family a desk
Chalk
Baby wipes

Step 1
Mark out a grid of 6 boxes and place each family in one box. Alternatively give each family a desk in the classroom to represent their room.

Step 2
This is a combination of Chinese whispers and Tag.

Tell the group that one of the good and bad things about the tenements is that every one was living so closely together. It could lead to great friendships but also it had a down side. Each family is going to send a family member to visit their neighbours for a gossip and a cup of tea.

Select one person from the family who will be the host and cover their right hand with chalk.

Each family selects who they will send for the gossip. This person’s objective is to get as much information about that family as they can during their time in their room.

Step 3
The selected family members move in a clockwise direction to the tenement room (or desk) next door. Tell pupils that on your signal they have 1 minute to shake hands and gossip before they then freeze. Then you ask them to move on to the next room and the next family member leaves for a gossip. The hosts always stay put and must shake every visitor by the hand.

Allow it to continue until the first family representative returns home or the only family member left in their room is the host. Then stop the game.
Step 4
Assess with the group how the chalk has spread. Tell the class that you were trying to show them how TB could spread in the tenements.

Step 5
Allow them to clean up.

Step 6
Debrief about the gossip and see if there is anything they wish to add to their family's information sheet.

Suggested activity
Research into TB in Ireland at the beginning of the last century.
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Session 4
Duration: 1 hour
Materials required:
- Cleared desks
- Print off the character briefs/role cards (provided at the end of this session)
- A Sheet of paper

Pre-drama work

Draw a line down the length of the page and tell the class that this is your timeline. It will go from 1900 – 1916. Ask them to think of any events they know fit in or happened in that period of time. While they may discuss The Rising for the drama purposes, it hasn’t happened yet.

For session 5, you may need to help them identify the variety of political events and forces during this time-frame in Ireland. It would be great to include the Gaelic League; the Abbey Theatre 1904: Home Rule; the Ulster Convenant in 1912; the Dublin Lock Out 1913 and the First World War 1914-1918.
Ask the class to think about and talk about what effect these movements and events would have had on our families before Easter 1916.

Step 1

Tell them that each family is going to have a meal together. Allow each group to set up their table and figure out what each member of the family will do to prepare for the meal. In each family there is a 16 year old. Ask them to come over to you as you wish to give them a piece of information while the others set up.

They are to tell the others their news over the meal. The rest of the family may have the gossip from the last session to share.

Invite each grandparent over and give them a role card. Again, they are only to bring the information up over the meal.
Step 2

Ask each group to set up for their meal and tell them that on your signal the 16 year olds will enter and the scene can begin. Allow each family play through the scene for as long as is comfortable. Freeze the action.

Step 3

Debrief each group about what was happening and how people are feeling. Ask each group to spend some time discussing what happened next. Allow the 16 year old say what happened in their story and invite the families to add any new information to their collage.

Suggested activity

I believe this is a good spring board into the exploration of the Easter Rising.
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Character Briefs for Session 5

16 year old Family 1:

You are going to join the Irish Citizen Army under James Connolly. You will be called to fight and give your life if the revolution comes.

Note:

The Irish Citizen Army or ICA, were trained trade union volunteers set up to defend workers during the Lockout in 1913 by James Larkin and Jack White. The Irish Citizen Army was reorganized in 1914. In October 1914, the Citizen Army was placed under the command of James Connolly. He felt that the ICA was a revolutionary organisation dedicated to the creation of an Irish socialist republic. He had served in the British army in his youth and knew something about military tactics and discipline.

The ICA was armed with Mauser rifles bought from Germany by the Irish Volunteers and smuggled into Ireland at Howth in July 1914. This organization was open to both men and women and trained them both in the use of weapons. The army’s headquarters was the ITGWU union building Liberty Hall and they were almost entirely Dublin-based. Other prominent members included Constance Markievicz, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington. In 1916, they took part in the Easter Rising – the armed insurrection aimed at ending British rule in Ireland.

16 year old Family 2:

You have coughed up blood. TB is rife in the tenement. It means you may spread it onto your family and you will die but you are not sure what to do.

Note:

Tuberculosis is a disease that was rife in the Dublin tenements. It attacks the lungs but can also affect other parts of the body. It can spread through the air when people who have an active TB infection cough, sneeze, or otherwise transmit their saliva. In many people there are no signs of infection, but about one in 10 infections eventually develops into the disease which, if left untreated, kills more than 50% of those that develops into a full illness.

The classic symptoms of active TB infection include a chronic cough with blood tinged sputum (spit), fever, night sweats and weight loss. It was also known as “consumption”. Rates of TB infection among the Dublin poor were 50% higher than those in England and Scotland.
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Character Briefs for Session 5

16 year old Family 3:
You have decided to join the union the ITGWU and the socialist party of Ireland as you believe the workers have been exploited long enough. True communists, like you are against organised religion as the Catholic Church. You believe that they are used by those in power to keep the working man or woman grateful for what they have and not look or fight for more.

Note:
The Dublin Lockout was a major industrial dispute between approximately 20,000 workers and 300 employers. The dispute lasted from 26 August 1913 to 18 January 1914, and is often viewed as the most severe and significant industrial dispute in Irish history. Central to the dispute was the workers’ right to unionise and have their rights, pay and conditions protected.

Many of those who fought in 1916 were linked to the labour movement, James Connolly and the Irish Citizens Army. Many communist didn’t fight as they were waiting for a global workers revolution, nothing to do with nations.

16 year old Family 4:
You have joined Conradh na Gaeilge and you want everyone in the family to speak Irish. You think Pearce is great and you may join the Irish Volunteer Force.

Note:
Conradh na Gaeilge was founded in Dublin in 1893 by Douglas Hyde. The organisation developed from the Gaelic Union and became the leading institution promoting the Gaelic Rival. It published the Gaelic Journal; the League’s first newspaper was An Claidheamh Soluis (The Sword of Light) whose editor was Patrick Pearse. The motto of the League was Sinn Féin, Sinn Féin amháin (Ourselves, Ourselves alone). It accepted women as equal members and they could play an active role in the leadership of the league, such as founder of the National Literary Society (later The Abbey Theatre) Lady Gregory. It didn’t commit itself to the nationalist movement until 1915 but it was where people from many nationalist organizations first met. Many signatories to the proclamation were members.

The Irish Volunteer Force lead by Pearse was the main fighting force in the Easter Rising.
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Character Briefs for Session 5

16 year old Family 3:
You want to join the British Army and join in the war effort. It is a job with a good income and gets you out of home.

Note:
Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom when it went to war against the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires and their military expansion across Europe. Both Nationalist and Unionist initially backed the war effort, but this changed during the course of the war. Over 200,000 Irish men fought in the war and approximately 30,000 died. Many returned to Ireland with awful injuries and many families were dependant on war wages and widow’s pensions.

Grandparents

Grandparent 1:
You have spent too much money on a hat for yourself or your wife and have to confess it to the family.

Grandparent 2:
You suspect your grandchild has TB

Grandparent 3:
You are a devote Catholic and go to mass every day. You fear the anti-church communists and socialist.

Grandparent 4:
Your family were from the countryside and spoke Irish but it was a struggle for them to get work because of their lack of English. You think Irish is a poor person’s language.

Grandparent 5:
You are a Republican and think that Irish people should fight for Irish causes.
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Session 5
Duration: 1 hour
Materials required:
- Masking tape
- The slideshow from session 2
- The collage and materials gathered from the previous sessions
- Paper and pens, A1 sheets and craft glue and scissors.

Step 1
Split the class in two and create two circles one inside the other.
Those on the outside are going to create a soundscape of the tenement for those on the inside to hear. They will then swap around. Discuss what might be the sounds in the tenement and allocate who is doing what sounds. Don’t forget the more cheerful sounds such as singing, laughing and playing. They must try to remember what they did as they may wish to use it later.

Those in the inside circle need to cover or close their eyes and there should be no physical contact. Allow the outer group create the soundscape which you conduct by raising your hand to indicate to increase the volume and lowering it to decrease it. Conduct this for about 2 minutes.
When the first group have finished, ask those on the inside what did they visualise during that exercise. Collect their images.
Swap around.

Step 2
Tell the class that we are going to jump forward to the end of the last century. Put the class into pairs, As and B’s.
The year is 1980. A’s are the remaining family members of the tenement families. They are going to be interviewed by historians gathering their stories of tenement life.
B’s are the historians. Each has a minute or two to think of what information do they want to get out of the interview. Ask them to think about what kind of questions they would need to ask to get that information.
Allow A’s to think about their family and what they want to say. Remind them that they are old but not mentally frail. Ask them to set themselves up for the interview including a chair for the visitor.
On your signal allow B to interview A.
Step 3

Inform the groups that you are about to bid farewell to the tenement families and you would like them to create a book of their family and their story. Using all the material they have gathered, allow the class time to create a folder/book of their family. Remind them to think about how they can include their soundscape and their stop animation/film.

Suggested activity

Create an exhibition of their work for viewing within the school.