

LARRY THE LIZARD: DISTRACTION OR DYNAMIC DEVICE?

by Tambi Price, Highland Rim Academy

INTRODUCING LARRY THE LIZARD

On September 7, 2016, Larry the Lizard became an instant icon in my third grade class. That morning, while chanting our Shurley English jingles, two loud yelps let out. Within seconds, everyone's attention shifted above the students' desks to the three-inch lizard crawling through the ceiling tiles. He had just surfaced on one of the fluorescent light fixtures, so his body appeared in a shadow formation as he scampered across the plastic grates. We were fascinated! We were mesmerized! We were distracted! The most well-behaved class at HRA let loose and temporarily lost all self-control!

THINK FAST! TURN ON THE CREATIVITY BUTTON.

My natural response was to spin a tale explaining why a little reptile was wandering around the ceiling of Highland Rim Academy. "Well, class, this is Larry the Lizard. He lives outside in a crevice along the brick wall near our playground. Today he wanted to stop by to learn about prepositions." Later that day, Larry provided a smooth transition to science class as we classified, compared, and reviewed vertebrates vs invertebrates, cold-blooded vs warm blooded animals, and reptiles vs mammals and amphibians.



YIKES! WHAT IF HE SHOWS UP DURING MY EVALUATION?

At first I thought to myself, "Well, this was cute today. Larry was all good and fun, yes . . . *but* when you *know* your headmaster is going to observe you the next day, you want to demonstrate the ability to control your classroom and manage behavior. If Larry shows up tomorrow, there may be a spontaneous combustion outburst due to the sheer excitement he brings. How can I predict responses and keep an orderly class?"

That night, I brainstormed. I wanted to use Larry as a teaching tool rather than allow him to be a distraction. The more I thought about it, the more I realized we all would celebrate if Larry showed up again. The authentic joy, enthusiasm, and wonder Larry would bring to our class would certainly delight Mr. Duncan's heart. (If only every school were filled with teachers and administrators more concerned with wonder and joy than the strict adherence to protocol!)

Tambi Price is the third grade teacher at Highland Rim Academy in Cokeville, Tennessee. Learn more at <http://www.highlandrimacademy.org>.

YOU MAY AS WELL PUT LARRY TO WORK

It was a piece of cake incorporating Larry into my classroom. Here are just a few ways I've used Larry the Lizard across the curriculum since his memorable appearance last year:

- Dictation (a paragraph devoted to him)
- Grammar (prepositional phrases / movements inspired for jingles)
- Science (reptiles/camouflage / ecosystems)
- Geography (Larry's quite the world traveler!)
- Creative writing (writing prompt for Adventures of Larry the Lizard)
- Math (Merv the Monkey: Merv is a "spin-off" buddy who came back to HRA with Larry from the Land of Prepositional Phrases. Merv is my math monkey who specializes in multiplication jingles and word problems. He's also the mascot of my Top Banana Math Club.)

Here's the spelling/dictation passage about Larry.

Larry the Lizard came inside the gym and hid underneath Andrew's colorful backpack. He climbed quickly up the wall and over the black pipes past the basketball goal. Two students in the back of the class screamed like wild animals when they saw Larry crawling above them. Later that day, Larry chatted with Emma under the green slide near his home in the crevice of the brick wall.

LESSONS I LEARNED FROM LARRY THE LIZARD

- 1. Spin a yarn. Revive the lost art of storytelling.**
Children love a great story. Learn to think quick on your feet. Inspire students by creating a clever character and/or storyline. Then, take the time to shape it, grow it, and improve it.
- 2. Change your perspective of thinking. Consider every challenge an opportunity.**
Develop the habit of asking: Can I turn this into a teachable moment? Can I build upon this? This takes effort, but the results will transform your teaching.
- 3. Draw your students in. LET THIS BE THE BAIT TO HOOK THEM!**
Can I make this fit into what we are doing? Make it relevant. Personalize it for them. Encourage/solicit relevant feedback, and use their excellent suggestions whenever possible. Rein them in. Allow students to use their imaginations and take ownership in the ruse / back story. You never know if this will take off. You may even inspire them to build their own story.
- 4. Encourage your students to find wonder and awe in daily life.**

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Larry resurfaced in our classroom a few more times that week. The timing of Larry's appearance couldn't have been better if I'd planned it myself. Students keep a watchful eye out for him on the playground, and they love to share their own stories about the day he first visited our class. Larry is now a legend at HRA! So you tell me. Was Larry the Lizard a distraction or a dynamic device? (I believe that's a rhetorical question.)