

Telling Stories

My second grade class is confronted with a number of stressors that that most seven year olds never experience. They are familiar with crime, whether culminating in the funeral of a cousin or one of their own school's paraprofessionals losing two sons--- one year a part to gang violence. (There was no need of special counselors to help my school's students cope with the ramifications of 911.) Unlike suburban children, they have no false sense of security. Danger is a clear and present condition, impacting their daily lives.

By default, their coping mechanisms are anger and hyper-defensiveness. They have an inordinate need to defend themselves--- against each other. It is imperative that they not seem weak in the presence of the group. Added to this is a mandated curriculum that ---for most of them---feeds their frustrations. Open Court, their reading and language program, lasts from 8:45 until 11:45 when they go to lunch. It is sacrosanct. It can not be tampered with.

Skills are force fed in whole group instruction with very little accommodation for individual needs or learning styles. It's not that teachers don't want to individualize or even tweak instruction to make it more effective and inclusive, it's that second grade teachers in California know that if they veer from lockstep fidelity to the scripted lesson, the curriculum coach, who visits each week with clip board in hand, will include this departure in her evaluation and that report will find its way into your permanent file.

What to do about a curriculum that breeds anxiety and frustration in teacher and student? Use Social Studies to implement the California Second Grade Standard 2.1:

differentiating between things that happened long ago and things that happened yesterday and use the artifact, folktale, to explore, “long ago.”

My objective for my one hundred percent African American class is to give them the opportunity to **experience language in a different way**, a way more meaningful and more connected to their cultural heritage. I want my second graders **to experience their class as community and to know the foundation of their community is their shared history**. I want them **to understand the power of story to teach, to ease troubles, to speak to them uniquely, to connect them to humanity**. For children so young, their own culture’s folktales and **folktales they create will be an introduction to their collective history**.

Today we’re able to reap the benefits of Zora Neale Hurston’s exhaustive search for the folktales of her own hometown. We have Virginia Hamilton’s THE PEOPLE COULD FLY; the ANANSI TALES; the ZOMO tales; Julius Lester’s BLACK FOLK TALES... to name a few. And, we have the rich creations of those who were enslaved. We can make the connection between West African folktales of long ago to the folktales of more recent times, folktales that grew out of the needs and passions of African Americans under the degradation of slavery. We see the common impetus in each collection: a story to that needs telling---a story to connect.

So I start with the way story connects. I end with the class being divided into cooperative groups working to create their own original folktale as a group, and working to create their own story quilt as a class community.

I begin with a story my mother told me when I was a child that I never tired of listening to, that offered me fresh satisfaction no matter how many times I heard it.

After telling them the story of **The Stick**, I ask my class how the story makes them feel. I list their feelings on the board. Then I tell them how it made me feel. It entertained me, it connected me to my mother, it let me feel the satisfaction of justice. I list the reasons stories are important--and *why they were important in our history*.

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Course

Language Arts-2nd Grade

Institute Participant

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Time Frame

10 days

30 minute blocks

Background Information

Students are familiar with folktales. They've had a number of them read to them or they've read them independently. Because folktales was a part of the unit "Sharing Stories" in their reading program, they are aware of the common characteristics all folktales share.

Objectives:

- Class will discuss their connection to Africa.
- Students will list what they have in common with the people of Africa (storytelling will be emphasized).
- Students will list why people tell stories and record the reasons in their Literature Journals.
- They will record the title of a favorite story and list the reasons they like it.
- On a page in their journals entitled, "African Folktales," they will list the reasons (as a result of discussion) the people of West Africa told stories.
- On a page in their journals entitled, "African American Folktales," they will list the reasons African Americans *needed* to share stories (after discussion).
- Class will review orally the common characteristics shared by all folktales.
- Students will listen closely to folktales, respond during the reading, and determine the lesson of the folktale.
- Students will record the title and lesson in their Literature Journal.
- Working in pairs, students will retell (orally) a folktale to their partner.

- Working in groups students will write and illustrate an original folktale that teaches a lesson. (Each child will contribute an illustrated portion of the story to make one cohesive tale.)
- Groups will select a representative to share their folktale, indicating first a signal that will lead to a class response. (The book will become a part of the class library.)
- Each group will select the best illustration to duplicate and contribute to a class story quilt to be displayed.

Materials: world map; the following folktales presented from the simplest to the more sophisticated, from the African to the African American : *Anansi the Spider* by Gerald McDermott; *Zomo, the Rabbit* by Gerald McDermott; *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain* by Verna Ardema; *Black Folktales* by Julius Lester; *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton; *Creole Folktales* by Patrick Chamoiseau; *Every Tongue Got to Confess* collected by Zora Neale Hurston

construction paper; lined paper; pencils; markers; plain paper; butcher paper; Literature Journals
journals

Activities

Day One-25 minutes

With class in their places on the rug, and the world map posted on the white board, pose questions about our common place of origin.

Discuss briefly how we, as a people were brought to the United States. (I can only do this because my class ---for most of the year--- was 100% African American.)

Discuss trials and tribulations they had to endure.

Discuss how they used music, song, and stories to ease some of their pain.

List purposes of stories and let children determine where their stories came from.

Pose the following questions: What were the uses of their stories? Can people learn from stories? Can they learn how to live from the lessons found in some stories?

List on the board good characteristics all people need to be successful regardless of time or place.

Draw a web on the board, putting the word “Folktales” in the center circle. Put the characteristics of a folk tale in the other circles: uses animals with human characteristics; teaches a moral; setting usually rural...

Tell class that they will soon have a chance to listen to three African folktales. They will have to be very good listeners to discover the lessons hidden in each tale.

Remind them:

A folktale needs a teller and an audience. The storyteller, the story and the audience are of equal importance. The audience gives their approval by clapping their hands, swaying to the beat and shouting comments or praises.

Tell class that they will get a chance to write and perform their own folktales. And their audience will get a chance to respond.

Day Two-25 minutes

- Read, *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton.
- Discuss the story and its purpose
- Put two columns on the board.
- Head one, “What Makes Me Happy About the Story.” Head the other, “What Makes Me Sad About the Story.”
- Have class list five things that make them sad and five things that make them happy.
- Emphasize the power of story to ease pain, offer hope, and inspire empathy.
- Discuss their lists.

Day Three-30 minutes

- Place three books on the rug: *Anansi and the Talking Melon*; *Zomo the Rabbit*; *A Story, A Story* on the rug.
- Discuss what each could be about.
- Let class decide on one to have read to them.
- Reiterate the “call and response” In Africa shared between storyteller and audience.
- Tell them they are to clap softly twice each time they hear a particular word in the telling of the story
- Remind them about the importance of the audience in storytelling.
- For example, each time they hear the word, “melon” in the Anansi story they may respond.
- Remind class they must listen very closely to discover a lesson in the story.
- Stop periodically in the reading to let them make predictions about the story.
- Once the story is read, class decides what the moral is and it is written on the board.
- Students may record the information in their Literature Journals.
- They may also list unfamiliar vocabulary words and simple definitions.

Day Four-25 minutes

- Pass out a photocopy of *Zomo, the Rabbit* to each student.
- Read to the class while they follow along with their own copy.
- Discuss and list new vocabulary words.
- Divide the class into pairs.
- At their desks have one child read the story to the other.
- Let them discuss the story and record the title in their Literature Journal.
- Have the other child retell the story in his own words.
- At the end of the activity, have the class come to the rug so that two or three can retell the story in their own words.

Day Five-30 minutes

- Review lessons that folktales can teach.
- Review the lessons of *Zomo...*, *Anansi...*
- Read *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*.
- Discuss the lesson learned.
- Tell the class they will think of a lesson that people need to learn and they will be writing a folktale to teach it.
- They will be breaking up into groups and working as a “team” to produce a folktale---with illustrations.
- Each member of the group will contribute an illustrated page of the folktale after working together on the moral and the plot.
- Model brainstorming moral and plot.
- Break class into groups.
- Let them brainstorm ideas and record them in their Literature Journals.

Days 6 through 10 ---Lessons will begin with the reading and discussion of an African American folktale from: *Creole Folktales*, *Black Folktales*, or *Every Tongue Got to Confess*. After discussion, students will be allowed to work on their group folktales. The lesson will end with a debriefing of their progress.

Days 10-15 Students will work on their contributions to the Story Quilt.

Evaluation/Assessment: their group folktales; their contribution to the class Story Quilt.

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