



Students Front and Center: Transformative Storytelling

When students are storytellers, they make content come alive.

BY MARY DEBORAH ENGLUND & FAYE STANLEY

The looks on their faces ranged from shock to horror—with the occasional tentative smile. A storytelling unit? Standing in front of people? How many people? Do we have to?

My name is Mary Deborah. So began my first foray as a teacher

into a storytelling curriculum. The class had delved into integrated study before, using plays that led into news story writing, and social studies with African content, but this was a new challenge. I had never considered the requisite skills for storytelling nor the

usefulness of teaching those skills to a group of middle school students.

Over the course of my 12-year middle school career, I had become interested in creating a classroom environment that was student-centered and collaborative. I

wanted to cultivate and develop the relational qualities of a vibrant learning community.

With the support of my division head, I began collaborating with master storyteller and teaching artist Faye Stanley. Together

we created an African storytelling unit that had us all doing something

we had never done before. We integrated our ELA content with social studies, which we *had* done before, but we used storytelling to move students to the center of the study.

The Storytelling Model

I am Faye the storyteller. I was excited about the possibilities of working with Mary Deborah on a storytelling project. In our earliest conversations, we discussed the fundamental goals of the unit. “I want the students to *know* Africa, not just learn *about* Africa,” Mary Deborah said.

The syllabus for the unit provided for reading, writing, and editing activities and skill development, as well as activities that focused on often-neglected listening and speaking skills. It was exciting to develop a plan that integrated these important language arts skills while relying on the creative efforts of student storytellers.

Developing Student Storytellers

Mary Deborah and Faye: In keeping with the initial goal of helping students learn about Africa, we began by “front loading” the unit with a cultural arts experience called Africa Play Day. Together we played games, sang, and moved to songs and stories that brought Africa to life.

Then students took part in the Babbling Circles exercise. In pairs, they moved in concentric circles, sharing with their partner a line from a well-known story and expressing an emotion that they had drawn from a bag. They became aware that changing the pitch, the speed, and the quality of their voices affected the meaning of the phrase. They didn’t look at their partners, thus becoming aware of the enormous meaning conveyed through eye contact.

For the Frame It! exercise, students used their bodies to convey emotions, identifying the body cues they used to express the specific emotion. Was it a raised eyebrow? Slumped posture? Wide stance? We photographed the students demonstrating the emotions and posted the pictures in the classroom with the emotion labeled.

As students began to value the exactness of language and of rich, visually inspired descriptions, their writing vocabularies grew.

The final component of our storytelling exercises was Audience Involvement. Students recalled how Faye had involved them in stories during Africa Play Day (signing, gesturing, body percussion) and they used that knowledge to develop different ways to involve the audience in the story.

Mary Deborah: Faye brought more than 50 brief, age-appropriate African folktales into the classroom. Students read and recorded on story tracking forms, their responses to at least 20 of the folktales. Strong readers loved the opportunity to read, and many completed more than 40 tales. Students who “didn’t like” reading often expressed surprised delight that the stories were short and easy to follow.

The silliness of many of the tales was appealing. Students could be heard encouraging each other to “definitely read *Cow of No Color*; that old woman is so smart” or “stay away from *Ananzi*; he’s a spider.” I overheard conversations about themes, settings, characters, even plots. Individually, students were comparing and contrasting stories! They loved the content of the stories and the independent nature of the activity.

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Next, students chose one of the folktales and began practicing their storytelling. Past exercises about voice, body, and audience were reinforced. As enthusiasm was building, so too was their nervousness about storytelling for others.

We looked back on the chosen folktales and discussed why the stories had no authors: they had been passed down from generation to generation. These students would be next in a long line of storytellers who were sharing this tale with listeners and, in the process, making it their own.

Students needed to separate from the text in order to make the stories their own. To that end, the student storytellers read their stories aloud only two times before mapping them in a series of simple drawings with sequenced plot and necessary characters.

Story maps in hand, students then practiced telling their stories. “Muddle through, no matter what, until you reach the end!” was the battle cry. After a few times with the map, students flew solo and



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began storytelling with engaged voices and bodies.

Practicing the Craft

Mary Deborah: With growing confidence, students began sharing with a classmate. This huge leap of faith—trusting a peer to support their growth—required a Coach Oath. Each listener signed a document agreeing to be attentive, supportive, and helpful and to provide feedback that the storyteller requested.

A Teller Goal Sheet with specific questions for the storyteller and the listener also guided the practice. Guiding questions included “Did I speak loudly?” “Did the expression on my face match my words?” “Did I make good eye contact?” Storytellers periodically answered these questions, then consulted their peer coaches for feedback. Choosing the skills they wanted to develop helped students feel in control of the process.

Initially, I was concerned that students would be unable or unwilling to recognize where work was most needed, but I discovered that most students were quite perceptive and set high goals for themselves regarding skill development.

Gradually, audiences expanded beyond the classroom. For homework, students practiced with a mirror, family member, or friend. (Acceptance of the Coach Oath was required before anyone was afforded the opportunity to listen.) A timely spring break provided many students with an opportunity to get plenty of practice, often with family members far away.

Our culminating event was The Storytelling Festival. After a long conversation regarding audience, the class arrived at a



consensus: the audience would be divided into groups of 10. Each student could invite a family member and someone else in our school community to be part of the audience. Some students invited a younger sibling or teacher from our adjacent lower school; others invited parents and grandparents; some chose not to extend an invitation outside of the group.

On the day of the festival, we all were excited and nervous. Visitors were seated and the storytellers began. In their eyes and mine, the event—and the unit—was an extraordinary success.

Though many students were afraid that they’d lose confidence, forget their story, or not be able to share, 29 of the 30 students succeeded admirably. (One girl with anxiety issues declined to share at the last minute. Later, she did a great job telling her story to me and her tutor.)

Reflections

The students’ unit self-evaluation included an overwhelming number of comments about **risk-taking** (“I never thought I could do it, but I did”); **trust** (“I wasn’t sure I could trust my classmates to not be mean but they weren’t”); **ownership** (“I loved picking out and choosing my own story”); **work ethic** (“In the beginning I didn’t work so hard. But then when I was a coach and heard others, I knew I had to start working harder”); and **creativity** (“I didn’t know I could put so much of me in my story. It was really fun”).

Faye: In my work in culturally responsive pedagogy, I am always cautious about claims of “knowing” culture. In the United States, our history of multicultural education provides a strong example of the shortfall of “tourist curriculum”—the study of festivals, folktales, food, and facts as an experience of culture.



That said, the broad and intense experience these students had with African stories and storytelling exposed them to a cultural tradition that included extensive metaphor, performance, relationships to nature, humor, and connectedness.

Mary Deborah: My goal at the outset of this unit was to create a student-centered classroom wherein the students and I partnered in learning. As I became less front and center, they moved into that position. They owned their learning as they chose from a rich repository of stories, analyzed and evaluated their reading, and determined the skills needed to take their story from text to presentation.

In fact, at year’s end, a visitor who learned that the students had been part of a storytelling festival told them how fortunate they were to have storytellers come into the school. “Do you remember the names of any of the tellers?” she asked. Their hands shot up as they named their classmates.

This unit held two surprises: 1. Midway through the unit, I introduced a writing assignment. The students were to rework their tales as news stories. I had taught this expository writing activity in the past and noted the difficulty students had with logical sequence of details. That was not the case this time. In fact, their writing reflected a strong understanding and sense of story

line. Telling it allowed the written pieces to flow with greater clarity.

2. When a conflict occurred shortly after our storytelling unit, a student who had difficulty reading social clues was able to understand how altering the tone and quality of his voice could make the interaction resolve much more successfully. The storytelling unit had given this student useful practice in understanding how voice conveys attitude—essential, I believe, for students who struggle reading social cues.

This unit required much from us as risk-takers; as trusting, skillful collaborators; and as competent, independent learners. I was reminded that my most important role was to develop a learning structure of trust and safety within which my students could flourish. As a teacher I had a front row seat to witness the powerful thrust of joyful learning—learning that required all of us to be uncomfortable and move through that discomfort.

That front row seat, rather than the center of the classroom “stage,” offers a pretty great view. 

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