

Building Global Connections Through Story
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In 1988, my parents gave me the opportunity to travel to Mexico as a part of a team of four young people and one adult with the organization, Children's International Summer Villages. CISV was founded on the belief that peace is possible if children create global friendships. For one month, we exchanged oral stories, played games, and learned from people all over the world. That experience shaped my vision that story builds community. I learned from a young age that regardless of the language we speak or the culture we celebrate, we all have shared stories. Storytelling in educational settings helps build bridges between cultures, facilitates raising children to be world-citizens, and prepares the next generation to become excellent communicators as we strengthen the global community. When I perform or teach, I consistently observe the audience, listeners and participants, make emotional connections to the stories, and find elements of commonality despite cultural differences.

However, for me, the most effective way to build global connections is through storytelling in artist-in-residency programs. Lessons can be designed to immerse children in another culture, teach Common Core Standards, and prepare them to “construct knowledge for themselves, learn about working collaboratively, practice the art of compromise, and develop presentation skills. All of these are important aspects of the world and workplace.”

The average length of my residencies is 5-10 days. I meet with the teacher a minimum of 2 times to discover the details of what he/she hopes I will accomplish during the residency. We often decide specifics about the curricula connections, essential questions and/or goals of the teachers. After meeting with the educators, I custom design the residency.

Previously, at Payne Elementary in Washington, DC, I and another artist from my organization, Story Tapestries, was assigned to help the teachers build stronger connections to World Culture. Each grade level at this school had been assigned one or two focus countries. They were supposed to be infusing their regular math, science, language arts and social studies curricula with information about the country. Before we began, most students did not have a clear understanding of what Kenyans, Brazilians, or Indians ate, or what types of characters were included in their folk tales. We set the goals as: We would teach story sequencing, character traits, and foods found in these countries through the art of oral and written narrative. One-week prior to the start of the residency, I performed three folk tales from around the world: one from Kenya, one from India, and one from Brazil.

Since the students I was working with were first graders, we decided to create, write, and tell a fictional story as a class. Day one, the students learned the tools

of being a creative storyteller: our voice, body, imagination and collaboration. During the second day, we took an imaginative journey to Kenya. One group pretended they were traveling to the Savannah. We took a walk through the dry grasslands, as it had not rained in over a month. After our story trip, we wrote down in our story outline the setting for our tale. The next day, we discussed the characters and their character traits. We tried on imaginary voices and bodies of different animals, finally settling on a Crocodile, Cheetah, and Zebra. During our subsequent session together, we discussed what kind of problems they have heard in other stories. We revisited the story I told the students' about Anansi. The children then proceeded to create and tell the story of what happened to these animals in the Savannah of Kenya.

After we had the first half of the story written down, the students told the story in a much more embodied fashion. We divided the class into 3 groups with each team representing a different character. While physically exploring the story through a variety of creative drama and active storytelling techniques, the tellers began to edit the story. Through the art of oral storytelling, we were able to add in great lines of dialogue, and more details about the sequence of events. On the 2nd to last day, the teachers and I wrote down the solution to the problem exactly as the students told it to us. We had a gap before the final 2 days of learning therefore I left the teachers with specific instructions on how to finish the process of editing their story using the art of oral narrative the way we had done previously. They did an amazing job of actively exploring the latter half of the story.

One week later, I returned to the classroom. The students stood in a half circle on the stage, telling every single part of the story. At key moments, they chimed in as one telling voice, and at other times characters spoke lines of dialogue. I was blown away by the detail of this story performed by a first grade class. When we administered the post-test, all of the students knew what a character trait was, and which food items were Kenyan, facts they had not all known before. The teachers were amazed by the effects this work had on their students. They told me afterwards that they had never considered using this type of storytelling with their classes. Now they were both planning on not only reading, but also telling tales both to and with the students.

If students are only given the opportunity to read the facts and not experience the stories, they will come away from school with a bare bones understanding of the world. I believe that future best practices in education need to include an opportunity for students to not only read narratives and information about other cultures but experience the tales themselves through global connections and oral storytelling. Only then, do I believe that we will build a generation of citizens connected to the world and ready to live in a global society.