



Gather 'Round the **CAMPFIRE**

Engaging Students and Creating Storytellers

Carrie Higgins
carrie.higgins@gmail.com

As Jamyrah came forward, the audience fell silent. She began to tell a story from *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton. The audience leaned in, not because she was soft-spoken but because her words held such beauty. Jamyrah, eight-years old, was experiencing her first time captivating an audience. She shyly smiled as several people wiped away tears. It was obvious the words spoken by this third grader touched something—and for her, this moment was a reward for all the challenges she overcame to arrive here.

Eight weeks earlier, it had been difficult to persuade the third-grade teachers to embark on a storytelling unit. During a planning meeting, they mentioned integrating traditional tales into our library lessons. My mind instantly transported me to the National Storytelling Festival I'd attended some years ago in Jonesboro, Tennessee. How entranced I'd been! The seed germinating in my mind began to bloom with possibilities.

When I proposed a storytelling unit culminating in a festival modeled on the national one, the teachers were rightfully skeptical: Could third graders appreciate the art of a story? Would they be able to not only memorize the story, but also add the necessary nuances? Would they take the risk of performing?

Furthermore, we are an urban public school with a portion of students labeled “Basic” or “Below Basic” on standardized reading tests. Could all of our students be successful in reading and comprehending the stories? Lastly, how could we organize fifty students to choose, learn, practice, and tell a story? The idea seemed difficult, if not impossible,

When students observe and identify effective performance techniques, they learn to appreciate their affect on an audience and are ready to try them in their own performances later.

to implement. Persuaded by my entreaty that we should at least try, the reluctant yet committed teachers and I began creating our unit.

Our doubts were soon revealed as unfounded. The students seemed to have a thirst for stories. They not only memorized them but delighted in creating accompanying voices and sounds. Expressive features and body language testified to their understanding of the story during their performances, and smiles of confidence punctuated their satisfaction at the conclusion. Most importantly, each student walked away knowing not only they had a story to tell but that others wanted to hear it.

The storytelling culture of a community is like a fingerprint—unique. Our fingerprint embodies the mission of our school, the spirit of our neighborhoods, and the values of our community. As an environmentally themed K–8 school located in Philadelphia, with over 80 percent of our students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, the culture of our school shaped the stories our students told. For example, many students chose stories about animals, reflecting the love of nature our school encourages. Others were inspired by stories from African American history and enjoyed creating a storytelling legacy by passing down these treasured tales. Others told more realistic tales with themes reflecting their everyday lives.

Each library unit (co-planned and

co-taught with the classroom teachers) is built around an essential question and underlying goals. We began by brainstorming our goals—exposing students to traditional tales, extending reading fluency, developing awareness of the characteristics of the folktale genre, increasing familiarity with African American stories, building self-confidence, and learning to map a story. An essential question soon emerged: how can you make a story come alive?

Because our classes meet once a week for forty-five minutes, we planned to make use of each and every moment. It would all be for naught, however, unless the students yearned to participate. Often we teach our young writers to employ the trick of hooking a reader in the first paragraph of a story in order to keep the reader interested. Using this same strategy, the first step planned was to catch them “hook, line, and sinker.”

With our calendar in one hand and our ideas in the other, we sketched out a timeline for the unit. Our students would need to be hooked, exposed to different stories, choose a story, memorize it, add expression and inflection, practice, and then perform it in eight weeks' time. Knowing our time constraints, we planned lessons and practice sessions for both the library and the classroom.

Week One: Gather 'Round the Campfire

Some of the best stories are told around a campfire. Whether it's the



storyteller or the ambience, these moments encapsulate the spirit of storytelling. To recreate that for my students during the first lesson, we arranged ourselves in a circle and handed out flashlights. The lights were dimmed and we turned on a CD with cricket sounds. With the students thoroughly excited I pushed the “play” button and the voice of storytelling legend Jackie Torrence pulsed through the darkened library. The students eagerly listened to a hilarious “Brer Rabbit” tale, followed by James Earl Jones telling Pete Seeger’s “Abiyoyo.”

During the discussion that followed, students remarked that the tellers modulated their voices, repeated lines, and used funny voices and sounds. When students observe and identify effective performance techniques, they learn to appreciate their affect on an audience and are ready to try them in their own performances later.

Week Two: More Stories!

It became apparent that the previous week’s lesson was successful when the students came in begging to hear more. Our objective of getting the students “hooked” was working. Student storytellers must experience

stories as listeners so that they can appreciate the art before attempting it themselves, and our students were well on their way to this goal.

What is one genre that hooks most third graders? Scary stories! After noticing the large number of students who asked for scary stories to read during book selection, it dawned on me this genre would reach the most reluctant storytellers. However, a question remained. Was it wise to allow eight-year olds to listen to this type of story? There were many reasons why I thought twice before proceeding, not the least of which involved nightmares. However, all but a few students were absolutely vibrating with excitement when I mentioned the word “scary.”

I planned two alternatives to ease the chill factor. If students preferred not to listen to a scary tale then they could enjoy a different story set up at a listening center in another part of the library. Gratefully, several (but not many) students moved to the other table. Giving students a choice increases buy-in while encouraging trust and self-esteem. By hyping the gentler (but still enjoyable) tale I hoped to release the stigma and peer pressure of the alternate choice.

The second solution I offered involved, naturally, another story. To offset my misgivings, I played the story “Shoes” from Torrence’s audiotape *Tales for Scary Times*. “Just before you get in bed, take off your shoes [and] place the shoes beneath your bed side by side” she tells the listeners. “Then spread the toes of those shoes so that one toe points . . . to the right and one to the left and then nothing will bother you. You see, there’s something about shoes that are spread out like that that will

keep [scary] things away.” In her deep, nurturing tone you intuitively know she’s right. Especially when you use “mommy and daddy shoes,” which, she insists, work best.

With the scare-free guarantee in place, we followed by playing a few ghost stories by Torrence. We began with the classic tale “The Golden Arm.” Students giggled, gasped, and sighed. “How does Ms. Torrence make the story scary?” I asked. “Her voice was creaky,” one student volunteered. Another mentioned she lowered her voice before the scary part and then, “POW! Hit me with her voice!” A student happily mimicked, “Wheere iiiis my goolden arrrrrm?” When I asked students to describe the setting and what the characters looked like, they were surprised that they had developed a clear picture without any illustrations. Acknowledging the power of imagery to develop a story was a “light bulb” moment. Clearly we had reached even the most reluctant students.

The next morning, a student stopped me in the hallway and exclaimed “Mrs. Higgins! It worked! I put the shoes under my bed and didn’t have a single nightmare.” A year later, students are still asking to hear “The Golden Arm” and other scary tales when they visit the library. Thank you, Jackie Torrence.



Week Three: Creating a Class Story

We have all experienced calling on a raised hand only to have that child tell a long story about something completely off-topic while the class loses focus. When it ends, everyone is left wondering where we left off. Initially I felt trepidation about opening this can of worms and letting students tell their own stories. Yet, I realize that everyone has a story to tell, and these stories can be nourished and shaped into effective and powerful performances.

We used a group story activity from Vivian Dubrovin's *Storytelling for the Fun of It* (1999, 28) to help students understand the relationship between plot and details. Each child received a numbered card with a different plot element to add. One-by-one students added to the story. In order to avoid creating comic book or movie knock-offs like "Pokemon vs. SpongeBob on the Planet IckyPoo" we developed the following ground rules:

1. Create original characters.
2. Tie your part of the story into what others have said—it should all make sense.
3. Use only a few sentences to describe what you are trying to say.
4. Respect your classmates through your words, actions, and body language.

Together, we wove an interesting story—each of us connected in some way to the fabric of the tale. After this activity, we created a poster to remind us of the elements a story should have: setting, characters, sensory details, a problem, and a solution. This chart became an important framework (as well as a

Student storytellers must experience stories as listeners so that they can appreciate the art before attempting it themselves, and our students were well on their way to this goal.

visual reminder) for our own stories the following week.

Week Four: Telling our Own Stories

After a quick review of last week's activity, we listened to "Orange Cheeks" as told by Jay O'Callahan and pointed out elements that may have come from his life. Then we compared our class story with O'Callahan's tale. Because no one student felt strong ownership of the class story, everyone was able to see that O'Callahan created a clearer picture and his story made more sense than ours. We learned that the stories that make a difference are often ones that come from our own lives.

To focus the students' thoughts on defining a personal moment that could be the seed for a story, they drew a scene from their own lives. We referred to the pictures as snapshots in order to stress the importance of concentrating on "one moment in time." Using conventions from the chart we created last week, students took turns telling a meaningful personal story while using their picture as a guide. Teachers circulated to make sure students were including these conventions, which are the foundation for a solid story.

Week Five: Choosing a Story

A story should speak to you before you can tell it to others, which makes choosing a story such an important step. In her helpful guide, *The Storyteller's Start-Up Book*, Margaret Read MacDonald likens printed stories to

King Midas' gold: "[print] declares a tale golden but freezes it into lifeless eternity." It is up to the teller to "release the tale and set it free to flow again."

To encourage variety, I created story stations around the room based on several themes including scary stories, trickster tales, and anthologies. As students visited each table to browse the stories, they chose their favorite by writing their name and the title on a post-it note and placed the note on the cover of that book. By choosing a story that calls to them, students prepare to become alchemists who will free these tales and release their riches.

Once stories were chosen, the students created invitations in their classrooms to send home to parents, caregivers, and people in our school community. By setting a date, the purpose for our hard work became less abstract; students eagerly worked toward the goal of sharing our stories. While the Storytelling Festival was the final stop on our journey together to become storytellers, this was by no means a one-way ticket. By accomplishing this goal, it allowed





students to continue to spread the legacy by sharing other stories in other venues on other days.

Week Six: Remembering our Story

Personally, I can barely tell a joke longer than a few sentences, yet somehow can retell a fully detailed version of MacDonald’s six-page story “Gecko.” How could I convince students that they, too, could accomplish this?

I modeled memorization techniques for them by telling the story of Gecko, a tiny animal that against all doubts ends the drought in his village. The story’s pattern involves one animal after another trying to stomp the ground for water while chanting his own name: “Hippo! Hippo! Heavy, heavy, heavy. Hippo! Hippo! Water, water, water.” Each large animal, in turn, fails to find water. Gecko has his turn and, despite the taunts of others, stomps his little feet and never gives up until the earth becomes damp and then water begins to flow. Students always cheer for the determined little Gecko—the underdog who wins! The patterned story makes memorization easier, and the audience helps by chanting the chorus using various animal voices as the story progresses.

Despite the focus of the lesson being on memorization, I made sure to also model the ways that a teller can influence the story: raising and

lowering my voice, varying the pace of the story appropriately, including all the key elements, and selecting words to paint a vivid picture. We reiterated these skills during every practice and eventually made them an important aspect of our evaluation.

Rote memorization of an entire story word for word would not only be impossible but would take the life out of our tales. Because stories are essentially a living, breathing thing they need a skeleton for support (later adding in the details that make them diverse and unique). Our “skeleton” is a story map. Story mapping is an invaluable tool for practicing and remembering a story because it reaches kinesthetic, auditory, verbal, and visual learners. Working from a copy of their story, each student transferred events onto an eight-panel story map. Students wrote one sentence per square to sum up the action at that point and drew an accompanying image. With their story “security blankets” finished, we moved into the home stretch.

Week Seven: Keeping the Campfire Burning

Something magical happens to a storytelling audience. Faces may react but the audience is often hushed and motionless. At the conclusion, there may be silence until the audience can collect their thoughts and float back. The transition between the end of the story and this awakening is palpable, and I always point it out to students.

During our weeks of practice, each student storyteller finally experienced this magic when we practiced in small groups. Beginning with using story maps to tell a story, students practiced independently. Once they felt confident they had the main ideas memorized, we then

assigned partners to take turns telling stories. Teachers carved out time for continued partner practice in their classrooms and assigned it individually for homework. By the end of the week students had moved away from relying on their story maps and were focusing on fine-tuning their skills as a teller to a small group of peers. We were working toward the goal of this “magic moment,” when the audience is fully captivated and picturing the story in their minds while the words swirl in their ears.

Week Eight: Fine Tuning

One student recalled that the hardest part of telling a story was “when I was nervous, everybody kept staring at me.” Preparation for this moment is important. Eventually this student was able to say that the best part of telling a story was when she “got over her fears.” That life lesson certainly surpasses our original goals of fluency and learning traditional tales!

Letting students “sink or swim” can be a valuable learning experience, but a child’s first solo storytelling experience is not the time for it. Before setting foot on the story stage, we wanted each child to be rock-solid ready. Students self-evaluated readiness by deciding if they felt ready to perform in front of a larger group. Students who did not feel equipped to perform continued to practice in partnerships, with teachers, or in small groups until



they were ready. Those that felt prepared were sent for a dress rehearsal with a small group.



This dress rehearsal also served as a pre-assessment. After the group read the skills (e.g., pacing, details, eye contact) to be evaluated on the rubric, students performed in the storytelling chair. As they told their story, I completed the rubric. Once the student finished, classmates took turns responding using the TAG process: *Tell* something you enjoyed, *Ask* a question, and *Give* a suggestion. This valuable peer feedback guided the child's final performance. Later I met with each student to go over areas of strength and areas to improve.

Storytelling Festival!

When visiting Jonesboro all those years ago, I was drawn to the atmosphere of the town. The decorations, music, and fabric "tickets" pinned to jackets—all added to the celebratory ambiance. Setting the stage is important, whether for a crowd of thousands or a much smaller school community.

For our festival, we hung a banner behind the main storytelling area. African drumming greeted guests, who were handed a program and a color-coded fabric "ticket." Students wore the colorful storytelling hats they had created in art class, a project planned collaboratively with the

art teacher. I began by describing how much work each child had put into the difficult task of learning and breathing life into a story. The audience was directed to break into groups by fabric color; their ticket denoted which group they were with, and matched that of their child if they were a relative. A teacher was assigned to manage each group and complete the rubric evaluating each student's final performance.

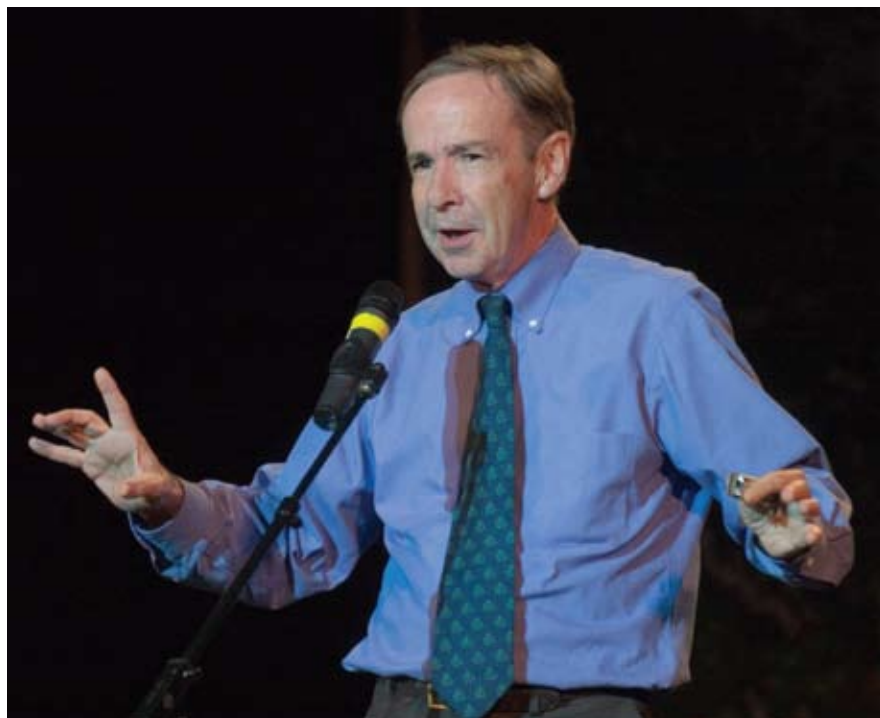
After the groups' stories had been performed, the audience returned to the library to celebrate the students' accomplishments, enjoy refreshments and hear a professional storyteller (our first year, we were lucky enough to have Ed Stivender perform). Students were proud and joyful and, a year later, were lobbying for a chance to do it again!

Evaluation

At the conclusion of any unit I make it a practice to not only evaluate the students but also myself. Students filled out a storytelling



survey to assess themselves and also my instructional practices. We garner valuable feedback from this assessment. For example, when asked what they would change about the festival, Per said he would "let everybody tell (their story) in front of everybody, not in different groups." Initially we divided students into small groups to ease shyness (and in the interest of time—can you imagine how long it would take to tell fifty stories?), but perhaps we could find a way to incorporate a whole-group telling next time. One child took this question as a self-reflection; Bryanna says next time she would "be a better storyteller and stay





focused,” offering “if you are nervous, picture everyone in their underwear!”

The teachers and I identified two changes: more time and additional resources. Given the luxury of time, I would add several weeks for listening, creating our own stories, and practicing. As for resources, we were able to purchase abundant storytelling tapes and books using funds from the federal Improving Literacy through School Libraries Grant www.ed.gov/programs/lsl/index.html.

And the skeptical third grade teachers? The following year, one completed this unit on her own!

Such enthusiasm is the true legacy of storytelling; each story (and storyteller) begins with just such a spark.

Approaching a storytelling unit is a bit like Gecko stomping the parched earth until water appears. If we give students a reason for working hard, provide a tangible framework, and have faith in each child’s potential, after some stomping (less than you would imagine), you’ll see the imagination flow! We just need the courage and energy to light the spark that releases it.



Carrie Higgins has previously published articles in *Knowledge Quest* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. She is

a member of Arcadia University’s School Librarian Certification Program’s Advisory Board and has worked as a library media specialist at Wissahickon Charter School in Philadelphia for five years.

Works Cited

- Dubrovin, Vivian. 1999. *Storytelling For The Fun Of It*. Masonville, Colo.: Storycraft Publishing, 28–30.
- Hamilton, Virginia. 1985. *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*. New York: Knopf.
- International Storytelling Center. <www.storytellingcenter.net> (accessed 22 Feb. 2008).
- Jones, James Earl, and Pete Seeger. *Abiyoyo*. Audiocassette. New York: Scholastic, 1986.
- MacDonald, Margaret Read. 1993. *The Storyteller’s Start-Up Book*. Little Rock, Ark.: August House, 63, 139–46.
- O’Callahan, Jay. “Orange Cheeks.” *The Little Dragon and Orange Cheeks*. Audiocassette. Marshfield, Mass.: Artana Productions, 1991.
- Stivender, Ed. *Story-Lovers*. <www.story-lovers.com/businesscards/stivender.html> (accessed 22 Feb. 2008).
- Torrence, Jackie. *Brer Rabbit Stories*. Audiocassette. New York: Weston Woods, 1984.
- . “Shoes.” *Tales for Scary Times*. Audiocassette. Chicago: Earwig Music Company, 1985.
- . “The Golden Arm.” *Tales for Scary Times*. Audiocassette. Chicago: Earwig Music Company, 1985.