

Storytelling as a Summative Assessment: A Journey of Collaboration

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Knowledge Quest Web Edition Vol. 36 (5) May/June 2008



“Narrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought.”

Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind*

It is not often in our careers that an opportunity to make a substantial difference in our students’ and teachers’ lives falls into our laps. In 2004, Georgia began rolling out a new curriculum – the Georgia Performance Standards. The new standards rely heavily upon project-based learning. I attended training with teachers from my school. As I rotated from grade to grade in the training I realized that my roles as instructional consultant and information specialist uniquely prepared me to assist teachers who were preparing to develop entirely new units. Over time, I have cultivated a close working relationship with the fifth grade teachers in my school. I met with the grade chair to propose a multidisciplinary unit that would draw upon several different subject areas, as well as the art, music, physical education, and computer programs. She enthusiastically agreed to this whole-school collaboration and we invited everyone to a planning session in the library.

The new curriculum required us to delve deeper into units than we had in the past. We developed a broad essential question, “How did Hawaii develop into the state it is today?” This allowed students to explore the individuals, groups, and institutions of Hawaii. They could look at migration to the islands and how the natural resources and physical features of the islands affected the inhabitants. The new standards covered the bombing of Pearl Harbor and Hawaii’s statehood. We thought that our students would be enthralled by this exotic island chain, since most of them have not traveled, except to visit family in Mexico or states immediately surrounding Georgia. Many of our students are immigrants learning a new language, so we thought they would be interested in a part of the United States where some people speak English as a second language and struggle to retain their native culture. We hoped that if our Latino and Anglo students could study a third culture in the United States, they would discover more similarities than differences on a human level. Our essential question gave all teachers plenty of room to integrate their individual subject areas. If we could integrate all of our subjects into a major project, our students could demonstrate a new depth of knowledge and we teachers would demonstrate our *own* depth of knowledge of the new standards. It was to be an adventure for students and teachers alike!

During the first meeting, the grade chair and I presented the idea of a multidisciplinary unit that we could submit for the county lesson plan collection. Our culminating project would be a program for the community. We divided the duties according to subject area. The physical education teacher would teach the entire fifth grade to hula. The music teacher would explore

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Hawaiian music with the students and teach them some of the traditional hula songs. In the homerooms, students would study and make volcanoes during their science class, study the culture and history of the Hawaiian people in social studies, and demonstrate their math and economics standards by researching and creating a budget for a vacation to Hawaii. In the library, students would demonstrate language arts and social studies skills by exploring the folklore of Hawaii. I would teach storytelling techniques and students would create their own performance of a traditional tale. The computer teacher agreed to oversee the creation of the printed program by the students. The program would include a glossary of Hawaiian words we would be using during the show. I gathered instructional videos on hula, CDs for the music class, and a list of travel sites and volcano sites for the homeroom teachers.

The entire fifth grade met in the library for an “Introduction to Hawaii” PowerPoint. The presentation gave a taste of language, music, food, history, dance, people, and volcanoes. When the students were sufficiently engaged and excited, we explained the project. Each subject area teacher introduced her component.

When it was the PE teacher’s turn to speak, you can imagine the reaction of fifth grade boys to the news that they would dance the hula. We explained that the original role of hula was to tell the religious stories of the people. Only men could tell these stories, and only special men were allowed to do so. It is a relatively recent development that women are allowed to perform. When we showed some footage of men dancing hula, the boys got on board. In fact, they were anxious to begin!

After the presentations, teachers scheduled their individual classes to come into the library for storytelling instruction. I began by modeling a story and leading students through a discussion of the components of storytelling – voice, language, and body.

Voice: Your voice is the strongest tool in storytelling. When listeners close their eyes, they should be able to imagine different characters just from the sound of your voice. Think about your characters – your voice will change for age, emotion, or geographical background.

Body: Your body language conveys a great deal about feelings and the physical attributes of a character. We practiced being the different characters in the Three Billy Goats Gruff.

What is the difference in the way they stand or walk?

Language: The words you choose should fit the character. Avoid letting slang or inappropriate idioms slip into your story. The prince thought Cinderella was enchanting, he did not think that she was “awesome!”



After the overview of storytelling techniques, I allowed the students to choose partners. The requirement was that one must be fluent in English while the other had to be fluent in Spanish. (Most of our Latino parents speak little English, so all of our programs are bilingual.) For our unit, I had collected several folktales from the Hawaiian Islands. There were enough to allow each team to choose a story to learn. I provided at least three versions of each story so that students could compare the differences of stories in the oral tradition. Each pair of tellers read all the versions of their stories, and then crafted their own version, in English. Finally, the Spanish-speaking teller translated the story into Spanish. This took a tremendous commitment on the part of our Latino students.

The tandem tellers had one week to outline the sequence of their story. I encouraged them to create the story orally, not to write it down. We focused on the tradition of *storytelling*. It tied directly into the fifth grade public speaking and genre standards. After that, the coaching process began. I used the technique outlined in *The Storytelling Coach* (Lipman 1995). The primary mission of this technique is to keep the storyteller in charge, to assure each child of a safe environment for the creative process. Then I explained the four-step process we would use:



1. **Perform:** The tandem tellers would perform, telling the story first in English then in Spanish.
2. **Appreciate:** The audience could offer statements of what we enjoyed about the story.
3. **Question:** The audience could make suggestions about parts of the story they did not understand

or that did not flow. If the suggestions are couched in questions about what would make the story better, the teller can improve the story in a manner that gives them power and ownership to the student. The creation process of the story belongs to the teller; only she or he could decide which suggestions to use.

4. **Request Help:** The facilitator (in this case, me) would ask the teller what other help he or she needs with the story.

Each time we practiced, we followed these steps. In the beginning, students did not want suggestions. They always received appreciations. As students became more confident in their public speaking abilities, they sought out suggestions to improve their stories and their techniques. When students create stories orally, it allows those with reading difficulties to thrive, as they gain confidence in their words. The Anglo students helped their partners comprehend the English versions. The Latino students took pride in their native tongue as they translated the English story faithfully. As they integrated Hawaiian words into both versions, students laughed at each other and themselves, appreciating the shared experience of learning a new language. When a boy told a story of the Menehune (the “little people” of Hawaii) in Spanish, we could tell where he was in the story by his expression and body language. When he described the

Menehune as strong and small, he unconsciously bent his knees and raised his fists in a “strongman” pose. His body language demonstrated that he was beginning to internalize the performance techniques which would bring his character to life for the audience.

All the participating teachers were excited to use this project as an exercise in authentic assessment for our standards and content. For example, the students’ budget for a vacation was a real life use of the math and social studies content that students had been studying during the year. The storytelling component encompassed reading, writing, social studies and information literacy standards. The storytellers had to synthesize their stories and evaluate each other, elevating the complexity of the exercise. The students researched the role of music and hula in Hawaiian society, utilizing their information literacy skills.

This was the first time so many of us had worked together to create such a complex, in-depth unit. Students spent the better part of a nine-week period on this project, so their quarter grades were based upon their performances in school. We created rubrics to assess student performance in all areas of the fifth grade curriculum – math, science, social studies, and language arts. For the storytelling component, we used the performance rubric from the Story Arts website as a starting point. (Forest, 2000)

Participation in the evening program was voluntary. Transportation is an issue with many of our students, so we conducted the assessments during the school day. We wanted the students who were able to perform at the evening program to enjoy the experience without the extra pressure of a grade. Most students wanted to take part, at least in the group dance. Three pairs of tellers volunteered for the program and we spent extra time coaching time preparing them for the show. On the night of the program, parents, as well as community members packed the gym. One pair of tellers told their story. Two students explained the history of the hula and introduced our first dance. Students sang and danced. A second pair of tellers performed. Another group presented a PowerPoint about food and culture of the Hawaiian Islands. The third pair told their tale, and we ended with a PowerPoint presentation on how much one would need to budget for a one-week trip to the islands for a family of four. Teachers remarked that some of our most outstanding storytellers were students who had not previously excelled in the classroom.



This project meant a great deal to students and teachers alike. Since then, students have come back from middle school and to tell me how much the experience meant to them. Homeroom teachers now seek out the specials teachers more often for partnership possibilities. Best of all, I have other grades clamoring to collaborate on similar cross-curricular projects.

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