

Let me tell you a story:

A rationale for the use of storytelling in the  
theater classroom

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This story begins in a classroom. Nothing special, just four walls, some chairs and light switches. In the center of this room stands a person, a teacher; willing, hopeful and prepared to share a story with their class. Enter the students, eager to engage and excited to see what today will bring in drama class. The stage has been set for one of the most miraculous activities known to man ... learning. We want the story to have a happy ending with our students being the kind of people who have self esteem and who value others. "I think it is possible only if we are willing to have a curriculum that says everyone has the potential to understand, and everyone brings meaningful experiences to the classroom" (Cahan & Zoya, 1996, p.40) and I believe that through the use of storytelling in the theater classroom our story can have that ending.

As a theater teacher, storytelling holds an important place in my heart and in my classroom. I find that storytelling is a wonderful way to begin lessons in acting as well as to introduce students to the concept of speaking for another person or character. Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss (2005) shared the insight that, "Storytelling is motivating. Students recognize it to be an authentic activity and a skill that is well worth acquiring" (p.7). I believe that curriculum designed for elementary and middle school drama practices should be geared towards teaching students life skills. Hamilton and Weiss (1994) share their insight that:

Learning to tell a story builds confidence and poise, improves expressive language skills, stimulates inventive thinking, builds listening skills, and develops an appreciation of other people, places and cultures. Children experience personal growth through risk-taking (p. 85).

For young students venturing into theater for the first time, telling stories is the perfect way to bridge something comfortable, a story, with this new risk that is theater. With this bridge in place, students become aware of the leaps they can make with these developing skills and the use of their imagination.

The art of telling stories within a theater class also fulfills a teacher's need to connect to certain state standards for education. One standard that stands out in specific is 2.7 from the section on reading and writing scripts. According to the standard, students will "read plays and stories from a variety of cultures and historical periods and identify the characters, setting, plot, theme and conflict" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1999). I believe the perfect way to begin this work with elementary school students is through the telling of folktales from different countries and cultures. It is important to share the opportunity with students to expand their understanding of the world around them. Hamilton and Weiss (2005) note that:

"Listening to folk and fairy stories from around the world, or stories written by people of various ethnic cultures, creates awareness and appreciation of cultures other than one's own...Children often arrive at school with biased ideas of world cultures. By telling folktales, we teach children to appreciate the differences among people around the world and make them aware of the similarities" (p. 24).

Storytelling also connects to the theater standards as a platform for the study of acting skills.

Vicky Crosson and Jay Stailey (1994) share that telling stories "can facilitate cognitive learning by placing information to be learned in a relevant framework" (p. 31). In this way stories create

opportunities for the practice and development of physical and vocal acting skills (standards 1.9 and 1.10) as well as for students to make and justify decisions on props and costumes.

I see a great need for young artists to express their own personal stories as a way to process, learn and grow. To this end, I believe that through telling the stories of others and honing their acting skills students can become comfortable with conveying human emotions both positive and negative. By becoming comfortable with the artistic medium of storytelling students can open their minds to telling their own stories and sharing their own feelings. Hamilton and Weiss (2005) note that:

“Stories act as a humanizing force. If children are expected to become moral, caring members of society, they must develop a strong sense of empathy. As children listen to and tell stories, they identify with characters who struggle to overcome difficulty, and in the process they work through numerous problem-solving and decision-making exercises. By living vicariously through the experience of others, students gain a sense of empathy and connection” (p. 22).

As a teacher, there is no greater reward than knowing you have given your students opportunities to grow and be empathetic and morally conscious individuals.

To this end, another benefit to incorporating storytelling into curriculum is that it offers material which lends itself to education about diversity and multiculturalism. In today's culture, students

are bombarded with incorrect information, stereotypes, and “role models” that are positively reinforced for negative behavior. In her 2003 article, Beekman remarks that:

“If their first experience of different ways in which the world works come only from popular culture, how can we then shake our heads in horror when they are unable to communicate their feelings appropriately, express their points of view intelligently, or respond to those with different traditions empathetically? Through the story experience we are able to make sense of the world” (p. 28).

It is our job as educators to encourage our students to explore the alternatives. Folktales have been passed down in every culture, every country, by every creed as a way of keeping history and traditions alive. “Storytelling is the oldest form of education. People around the world have always told tales as a way of passing down their cultural beliefs, traditions, and history to future generations” (Hamilton & Weiss, 2005, p. 1).

My community, Derby Academy, is a private PK-Grade 8 school on the South Shore in Hingham Massachusetts. There are a couple of ways which I would propose to integrate storytelling into the curriculum and into the campus culture. Firstly, I would propose to incorporate a storytelling component to the already standing cross-curricular project known as International Night. Each student is assigned a country which they research, compose a report on and create maps, travel posters and flags. I feel that the incorporation of culturally relevant folktales from each region would be a wonderful expansion to the project and a way to introduce the community to the art of storytelling. Through the International Night presentations, I hope to spark student interest in the art of storytelling and offer a weekly club. Students will have a place to gather to listen and to

tell stories from around the world and from their own back yard. I have heard it said that young people are naturally philosophers and “storytelling can also help address higher-level thinking that facilitates the imaginative process upon which our values and beliefs are built” (Crosson & Stailey, 1994, p. 31). Through self expression students learn a great deal about themselves, the world around them and can further their personal philosophy, beliefs and comprehension on many levels.

The art of storytelling applied in the theater classroom has the potential to make this art form accessible to every student who enters through those doors. “When storytelling comes to school, everybody wins, because storytelling creates multiple points of entry for learning. It addresses all ways of knowing ‘multiple intelligences’, and all learning styles, allowing all children to succeed” (S. Norfolk, personal communication, February 20, 2010). As I bring the curtain down on this story, I would like to leave you with one last thought. “From the beginning of time, storytelling has been the means by which cultures and societies have preserved and celebrated their memories ...” (S. Norfolk, personal communication, February 20, 2010). Not every story can have a perfect ‘happily ever after’ ending, but by keeping the art of storytelling alive we keep the lessons, the cultures and the memories alive as well.

## Reference

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**Folktales for International Night:**

A storytelling lesson plan

5/2/2011

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**Curriculum Unit/Lesson Topic:**

Unit 1: International Night Drama Project.

Topic: Telling a Folktale from the country you researched.

**Grade Level & Classroom Description:**

Grade 5 Drama - Spring semester

10 students per class x 3 classes

Mainstream classroom students.

[Note: Lesson built for Derby Academy. Private PK- Grade 8 school in Hingham, MA. Drama portion of cross curricular multi-cultural study of countries around the world.]

**Story examples for the Activity:**

Ingen, R., & Hayes, B. (1994). *Folktales & fables of the Middle East and Africa*. New York, NY:

Chelsea House Publishers

Ingen, R., & Hayes, B. (1994). *Folktales & fables of the Europe*. New York, NY: Chelsea House

Publishers

Ingen, R., & Hayes, B. (1994). *Folktales & fables of the Asia & Australia*. New York, NY:

Chelsea House Publishers

Ingen, R., & Hayes, B. (1994). *Folktales & fables of the Americas & the Pacific*. New York, NY:

Chelsea House Publishers

**Rationale for folktale being students' choice:**

In choosing their own folktales from the country they are studying, students will have cross-curricular motivation for deep research and understanding of that country and its culture. While learning the story, students will use their higher-level thinking skills. As International Night is a cross-curricular project engaging multiple art forms, Social Studies, English and research skills, it will touch upon many of the multiple intelligences giving each student an opportunity to shine.

**Learning Accommodations:**

Be available for one-on-one rehearsal sessions for ADD, ADHD, learning different students and students who feel the need for extra help. Provide index cards for student use to create "cue

cards." These cards can be words or images to aid students in remembering sequence and key points for their folktales.

### **Main Objectives:**

#### **Academic Objectives: Massachusetts Arts Curriculum Frameworks - Theater**

- 1.8 – Make and justify choices on the selection and use of props and costumes to support character dimensions.
- 1.9 – Use physical acting skills such as body alignment, control of isolated body parts, and rhythms to develop characterizations that suggest artistic choices.
- 1.10 – Use vocal acting skills such as breath control, diction, projection, inflection, rhythm, and pace to develop characterizations that suggest artistic choices.
- 2.7 – Read plays and stories from a variety of cultures and historical periods and identify the characters, setting, plot, theme and conflict.
- 5.8 – Identify and discuss artistic challenges and successful outcomes encountered during creative and rehearsal process.
- 5.10 – Give, accept, and use constructive criticism that identifies the specific steps needed to revise and refine their own or the group's work.

### **Teacher's Objective:**

This lesson is geared toward students making personal choices for script material and engaging in personal investments in rehearsal and performance. Through studying, performing and hearing stories from cultures around the world, students will develop a better understanding of the differences and similarities in communities around the world. They will also continue to develop their skills of characterization through physical acting, voice and props as well as actively engaging in constructive critique exercises- both giving and receiving.

### **Blooms Higher Order Thinking Skills Accessed During Lesson:**

#### **Analysis**

Students will analyze the key plot points and characters for their folktale as well as rhythm and cultural references within the tale.

#### **Comprehension**

Students will interpret the meaning of their folktale in the context of their research on their assigned country. They will also strive to make connections between their personal country and culture and that which they are studying in order to comprehend similarities and differences.

#### **Evaluation**

Students will assess the progress of their acting skills and ability to give/receive constructive criticism. Through self evaluation the students will summarize their strengths and weaknesses within this project.

#### **Knowledge**

Students will remember the key plot points and rehearsed delivery of their chosen folktale.

### **Gardener's Multiple Intelligences in Relation to this Lesson:**

#### **Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence**

Students will engage their whole body and voice to develop characterizations when telling the folktale. Body control and voice modification will be central to effective creation of clear character.

#### **Intrapersonal Intelligence**

Students will engage their self knowledge in the rehearsal process while developing a comfort with being on stage. They actively use their intrapersonal intelligence during the journal assignment which will require them to access their concerns and excitements for the project.

#### **Interpersonal Intelligence**

Students will employ their interpersonal intelligence while giving constructive criticism and encouragement to classmates throughout the process.

#### **Verbal/Linguistic Intelligence**

Students will show their verbal/linguistic intelligence through folktale choice, explanation, comprehension and performance as well as in their journals and final self assessment.

#### **Time Allotment:**

1 hour sessions – 2 times per week (Monday +Wednesday)

**Materials:** Once research has been done on the assigned country and a story is chosen (English and Library Science classes) students will come to class prepared to explain their story choice and how it relates to their assigned country.

Library access for story research

1 photo copy of chosen story

1-2 packages of blank index cards

Pencil for marking script and making notes

#### **Space Requirements:**

Larson Hall – Campus assembly hall and theater provides multiple areas for pair rehearsal and group performance practice. Location will allow opportunity for students to develop comfort with the space where the International Night presentations will take place.

#### **Procedure:**

##### **Day 1**

Warm-up (5min): Engage students in physical and vocal warm-up including stretches, tongue twisters, etc.

Discussion (20min): Sit in circle and have students explain story choice and how it relates to at least one culture represented in their assigned country. (1-2 min each)

Preliminary reading (20min): In groups of 2 or 3 have students read their story aloud.

Questions (10min): Have small groups discuss the following questions about their folktales.

- What are the key plot points in each story?
  - From what characters perspective do you think you will tell the story?
  - Any other questions they want to ask each other about story choice and country.
5. Assignment (5min): Assign students to journal for the next class on the following.
- What have you identified as the key plot points in your folktale?
  - What perspective will you tell the folktale from?
  - How did it feel to tell your folktale aloud to others?
  - 3 concerns and 3 reasons you are excited for the project
  - PRACTICE PLEASE! Read story aloud to family, your pet, a mirror ... at least 3times

**Procedure:**

**Day 2**

Warm-up (5min): Engage students in physical and vocal warm-up including stretches, tongue twisters, etc.

Discussion (20min): Talk about journal assignment from last class and characterization.

Practice (30min): In small groups of 2 or 3 have students practice story aloud without script

Assignment (5min): Practice over the weekend. Make "cue cards" for key points, words or images that will help them remember the story in sequence.

**Procedure:**

**Day 3**

Warm-up (10min): Engage students in physical and vocal warm-up. Also check in on how they feel about their progress.

Practice (10min): Practice story aloud alone

Stage (40min): Have each student practice telling folktale from stage to the rest of the class.

**Procedure:**

**Day 4**

Warm-up (10min): Engage students in physical and vocal warm-up. Also check in on how they feel about their progress.

Discussion (10min): Talk about journal assignment from last class.

Practice (40min): In small groups of 2 or 3 have students practice story aloud without script

Assignment (5min): Practice over the weekend. Make "cue cards" for key points, words or images that will help them remember the story in sequence.

**Dress rehearsal week and culmination of International Night presentations**

**Next class will be self evaluations followed by teacher evaluations.**

**Take into consideration progress, not just product.**

**Assessment: See attached rubric.**

**Notes to Instructor:**

Encourage students to share what is helping them to learn their folktale with classmates. Study aids such as "cue cards," practice, telling aloud to others, writing the story out, etc should be shared.

During the development of this project be available to students for recess and free period/ study hall rehearsals. One on one attention is crucial to aid students with learning differences. Be sure to talk with each student who seeks help and individualize the attention for their needs.

Also, be aware that not all students will seek this extra help and may need encouragement to join you.

**Assessment Rubric: Folktales for International Night**

**Name:**

My skills are:	Teacher’s assessment	<p align="center"><b>Folktale: Criteria for Success</b></p> <p align="center">Self/teacher evaluation</p> <p align="center">(Ms. Jag)</p> <p align="center">Rate each on a scale of 1-5</p>
		<b>Research and Rehearsal</b>
		Chose an appropriate folktale and supported the cultural connection to assigned country with research
		Prepared for class with all required materials
		Participated in warm-ups both vocal and physical
		Active participation in discussions and journal exercises
		Worked well with small group exercises
		Offered constructive criticism and support
		Accepted constructive criticism and support
		Used physical and vocal acting skills (diction, rhythm, inflection, body control, etc.) to show clear characterizations through story
		Identified personal challenges in the assignment and worked to overcome these challenges.
		Showed good use of ‘audience skills’
		<b>Performance:</b>
		Clear expression of character through use of vocal and physical acting skills that were developed through rehearsal
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Speaking volume clear to audience without shouting, use of breath support for voice.</li> </ul>
		Speaking at a good rate, not too slowly or too fast.
		Clearly expressed ‘moral’ to the folktale and maintained story line during performance
		Showed good use of ‘audience skills’ and support for classmates during their performances.

**Student comments on personal progress: How have your skills grown?**

**Teacher comments:**

JAG