New Directions in Arts Education

Storyboard Theatre

by Steve Peisch and Lisa Stanley

We have developed a fun and effective version of "storyboard theatre" at our summer camp, and we are sharing it in hopes that other people might find some of our ideas useful in their own camps and classrooms.

Our version of this approach involves reading African folktales to children between the ages of 9 and 13; asking them to get inside the stories as if they were the storytellers themselves; asking them to create their own stories based on an African animal of their choice; and, finally, asking them to combine their animal characters into short plays, which they perform for each other and improve after listening to suggestions from their peers, counselors, and teachers.

This project is both fun and instructive for young people because it accesses and develops several different skill areas within a summer camp atmosphere.

The one-week program begins in the art room, where students pick one particular African animal and begin both drawing it and creating some sort of mask representation. In the afternoon, they are read African stories involving animals that possess human personalities.

We have found that students can quickly compose creative stories simply by answering a list of useful questions about their character's personality, their character's environment, its friends, its enemies, and its problems. This process is entirely oral, like the African traditions that yielded the hundreds of African stories that are now available to us.

The oral approach is more effective than writing. Ask typical 9-year-olds to write their stories down in the early stages, and they will begin with "Once upon a time. . ." Creative rigor mortis quickly sets in. Not only is a student's imagination constrained by trying to fit a story to this clichéd and limiting format, but this request also forces young people to attempt capturing a relatively fast and sophisticated thought process (their imagination) with a relatively undeveloped skill (their ability to communicate their thoughts in writing). Children of this age are happy to create and tell interesting stories given the proper context, but writing them down is a very different matter.

Students then work in pairs with a list of questions to ask each other about their animal characters; they take turns being either interviewer or interviewee. Once all of the blossoming storytellers answer these questions, they have frameworks for stories about their animal characters. Using this method, the student interviewers are encouraged to pose their own questions if and when they occur to them, and they also become very involved in stories other than their own.

Human beings seem wired to talk to one another and collaborate in this way, and, in our experience, young people work well together most of the time. Most had no difficulty imagining stories when asked the right "guiding questions" and given the supportive context in which to answer them. While it is useful for the teacher to model the interview process with a student or a teaching assistant, too many repetitions of this process rapidly become boring for children. Generally, one model interview suffices, and then the groups of two can begin operating on their own.

The balance between "fun" and "instruction" is something we think about constantly. Assigning the interviewing and storytelling responsibility to the kids makes this work fun because they enjoy talking with one another, and they enjoy imagining these stories on the spot. For us, the word "fun" refers to a type of engaged play in which students are thinking creatively and even strenuously but also enjoying themselves thoroughly. Laughter and smiling are good indicators of the presence of this type of fun, but so are wrinkled brows, thoughtful expressions, and intense conversations.

Once they have developed their individual characters and stories, the students begin to create skits form this material – skits that they rehearse, critique, and perform in front of the rest of the camp during the very last hour of the program. Again, the emphasis is on fun, but our program also provides foundational instruction in acting.

Children are asked to act like the characters they have created, and the imaginative work they did earlier in the process of creating their stories is now applied to the creation of an imagined animal character to be presented on stage. The idea that "acting is believing" (a basic approach to teaching acting to professionals) grows organically from the creative work they did previously in the art room and in the storytelling workshops. This previous creative work also

informs the acting training that we do with our kids, and it can provide the conceptual groundwork for any stage acting they might pursue later in life. Children are asked to imagine what it would be like to be a particular animal: How would they feel physically? How would they talk? How would they move? How could they make it clear to an audience what animal they are depicting by the choices they make on stage?

The skits are put together in a variety of ways, but they are built first and foremost on a strong narrative. Their animals have personalities that come with the flaws and foibles of human beings. These create problems or conflicts with other characters, and from these conflicts come the dramatic skits. While doing the work of combining characters, young people can become confused, and they need to be reminded that they are first creating a story about their characters; second, they are being asked to combine their animal characters with other animal characters to create a new story for a skit; and third, they are being asked to collaborate with others to present this larger story using the conventions of theatre.

Three questions are particularly helpful to young people as they develop their skits:

- What happens in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of your story?
- What is the problem that comes up in the story?
- How is that problem solved?

Even 9-year-olds have many interesting answers to these questions, and they are capable of sophisticated creative and explanatory logic, provided their inquiries and conversations are properly led.

As teachers, we make suggestions and revisions to ensure that no student becomes embarrassed, because embarrassment can wreck the week's work and even have long-term consequences, like killing further interest in performing. The students are also encouraged to give each other suggestions that will help the skits improve. These feedback sessions are both enjoyable to the children and helpful to the performers. Children notice the same things that adults notice, and it is more effective for the performers to hear from their peers about the obvious weaknesses that invariably present themselves: "We can't hear you"; "We can't see your face"; "Why did the lion drink the water?" During these sessions, young people are first trained to compliment each other and to apply their imaginations to the problem of creating good skits; then they progress very carefully to offering suggestions and criticisms. Once the skit is ready to be staged and enacted, our simple set – a tall, black "book flat," 3 black boxes, and minimal props illuminated with photo lights in a darkened room – works well for the final low-key show.

At the end of the week, students leave with an elaborate mask of their animal character and a short synopsis of the story's scenario glued inside. Typically, these art objects are displayed at home, and the young artists are interviewed about their work by members of their families--asked about the character it represents and the story that grew from the character. Years later, people can refer back to this mask for refreshment as their lives and their "stories" become increasingly complex.

The program connects several skill domains, including visual art, language arts, speech, drama, and movement, and it develops children's individual creativity, ability to work together effectively, and ability to communicate with one another in a wide variety of ways, including explanatory speech. Given more time and the requisite instructional expertise, it could also easily be connected to biology or ecology units about the various animals and their habitats or to a social studies unit about African cultures. It could also incorporate dance and music components. What makes the program unique are the connections we have been able to make across different subject and skill domains in a project that kids consider a lot of fun.

These connections elicit and integrate a wide variety of both imaginative and analytical thought from children, yet the program is also very simple because it takes advantage of what children already seem eager to do. It takes all of us back to the days when we, as children, pulled a blanket over a few chairs on a rainy afternoon and transported ourselves from the land of here and now to the savannahs and jungles of our group imaginations.