

Creating a Student Storytelling Troupe & Making the Common Core Exciting

# STORIES by STORIES

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STORYTELLER AND TEACHING ARTIST



**STEP-BY-STEP PLANS  
TO TEACH STORY  
PRESENTATION—  
PLUS REPRODUCIBLES  
& TEMPLATES**

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Summary: "Karen Chace's book, *Story by Story, Building a Storytelling Troupe* is a must have for anyone even slightly interested in starting a storytelling group with students. I know I am guilty of sometimes skipping over sections, but every word that Karen writes is important and useful distilled (and therefore potent) information. Ms. Chace not only tells you what to do to run a successful troupe, but also WHY you need to do it. This is, to me, very important. Sometimes one is tempted to skip things, but this book explains how important the steps are. Everything from how many hours Karen thought it would take, to ACTUAL hours, where the funding comes from, how and why to lay foundations and expectations (including 'no teasing policies' and group dynamics), right the way through presentation skills to advertising the event and getting bums on seats (emphasis important)! Over the years Karen has and continues to come up with new and inventive ways of teaching the skills of storytelling, and a great many of these exercises and activities are included in the book. When it comes to research and materials as well as technique, Karen adds new meaning to "thorough". There are links to websites for stories, for grants, for microphone techniques, and how storytelling connects to the school curriculum and more. And if you prefer to read books, there is an extensive bibliography, too. Basically, I believe if you want to succeed in building a storytelling troupe or group, all you need is Karen Chace's book, *Story by Story, Building a Storytelling Troupe* and to do everything Karen suggests. I am sure it would be very hard to fail if you follow her words of wisdom between the covers of her goldmine of a book. Simon Brooks, storyteller, and educator"-- Provided by publisher.

Summary: "A professional storyteller and educator's experience-based handbook on creating a student storytelling group, coaching K-12 performers, content selection, and methodologies for incorporating storytelling the curriculum or programming of non-school groups such as scouts, with pre-designed handouts, awards, etc"-- Provided by publisher.

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## *Preface*

Once upon a time ... isn't that how all wonderful stories begin? I am often asked, "How did you find storytelling?" My response is, "Storytelling found me."

As a college English major I considered registering for a children's literature course. I purchased the text but in the end did not attend the class. Years later, that book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, by Bruno Bettelheim sits on my bookshelf alongside the hundreds of folktale books I have collected through the years. I often wonder if I had attended that course would I have found my vocation sooner. Instead, it was simple serendipity that led me to a storytelling performance years later and brought it, and hundreds of students, into my life.

In 2002 when I began directing my first storytelling troupe I could never imagine it would become such an integral part of my work. I confess, I was naïve and took a leap of faith without looking too far ahead. I was fairly inexperienced and in the beginning turned to my more knowledgeable colleagues for guidance, using well-known learning models and activities. While I am forever grateful for those who led the way before me there is no greater platform for discovery than observing and listening to those we teach.

As a storyteller and teaching artist I know the value of storytelling and understand how it strengthens any education model. We can read the important scientific research done by Kendall Haven in his book *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story* and the *Position Statement on Storytelling* by the National Council of Teachers of English to validate its impact. There are many papers and studies that prove storytelling is a compelling tool to help students cross cultural boundaries and embrace diversity. Yet, those of us who work closely with children realize there is no substitute for a hands-on approach; I have witnessed astonishing transformations take place before my eyes. When I look

into the confident, joyful face of a student after their performance or hear from parents years later commenting on the continuing, positive effect of the program, I am further convinced about its significant and far reaching impact.

Over the past decade I have brought this program to a number of schools and my experience allows me the flexibility to adapt to specific curriculum and residency needs. This program is designed to accommodate the various learning styles of the students and the time frame offered by the school's administration. Why is student storytelling important? Their minds are open, ready to explore new ways of learning. They are willing to play, and it is in these moments of play they learn new language skills, social interaction, public speaking, vocabulary, team work, tolerance — and they are having fun!

Since many of my students return for multiple years it is important to keep things fresh and fun. As I progressed, I designed new written and interactive activities; some were sparked by a student's off-hand comment, bubbled up while watching their audience interaction or during a classroom activity as they practiced their stories. These 12 unique activities, found in this book, complement a variety of learning styles and will deepen your student's engagement with their stories. I hope you will not only find them useful but that they will act as a springboard for your own creativity. In addition, my friend and colleague, Illinois storyteller and teaching artist Sue Black, generously offered to share some of her unique activities as well.

I have taught more than 500 children to date and the program has changed and matured through the years. I have adapted, reassessed and reinvented, and through it all I continue to be inspired by my students. I am in awe of their courage as they face their fears and overcome personal challenges: It is the painfully shy child who, in the end, not only completes six school performances but arrives at the festival eager to step into the spotlight. It is the autistic boy who always wanted his turn at the microphone throughout elementary school and finally has his chance in fourth grade. He bows and smiles from ear to ear as the audience thunders with applause. It is the tandem team courageously overcoming a difficult stage experience by trusting me to build back their confidence one performance at a time. Their goals become mine.



Their willingness to play with story, their eagerness to learn, examine, investigate, to make a story their own, is infectious. I am a better storyteller and teacher because of them; their commitment inspires me to craft new ways to connect with them both individually and collectively. Their personal experiences, like cumulative folktales, build one upon the other, each student, each year adding layer upon layer of passion and strength to my work; I continue to hear their voices in my heart.

KAREN CHACE  
[www.storybug.com](http://www.storybug.com)  
May 2014

*“The destiny of the world is  
determined less by the battles  
that are lost and won than  
by the stories it loves and  
believes in.”*

HAROLD GODDARD

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Breaking Ground*

### **Obtaining Administrative and Staff Support**

As a beginning storyteller I volunteered in the classrooms and for Literacy Night at the local elementary school, offering the teachers a window into the power of storytelling. Later, hired for the Reading Incentive Program, they observed first-hand the value of storytelling in the curriculum, an important building piece when it was time to write a proposal for the student storytelling troupe.

At the end of the 2002 school year I spoke with Lisa, one of the fourth-grade teachers. She asked if I would be willing to storytell the following year at the annual fourth grade picnic. After discussing the possibility, I serendipitously said, *“I would love to start a storytelling troupe at the school.”* She was intrigued and agreed to discuss it further at the beginning of the new school year.

In September, we spoke with the third and fourth-grade teachers to assess their needs, constraints and curriculum requirements since the program would be taught during the school day. However, it was made clear that the storytelling troupe would not add extra work to their day; the storytelling teacher would handle correspondence, notices, schedules, etc.

### **Writing the Proposal**

After writing the proposal (No. 1 in Appendices) a meeting was arranged with the school principal. His response was immediate and enthusiastic. The results from the recent NEAS&C (New England Association of Schools & Colleges) evaluation process had just been received. One comment from the committee was that the school should offer additional programs for the students. Luck, timing, call it what you will, the Storytelling Troupe was born!

### **Obtaining Program Funding**

The PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) was responsible for raising funds to supplement Cultural Arts Grants and the principal agreed to present the proposal. It was broken down into an hourly rate, based on the 25 hours estimated to complete the residency. The cost was based on preparation and classroom time estimated to ready the students for our end of the year storytelling festival.

The plan was to offer the troupe to both the third- and fourth-grade students, at 10 weeks each, a total of 20 hours. It was anticipated that an additional five hours to offer performances for the students in various grade levels. However, the timetable would prove to be extremely inadequate. The detailed records indicated an excess of 105 hours to ensure the success of the program. The next year a detailed timeline, with hours assigned to each task, was presented with copies of every correspondence, including emails, reports, notices, articles, etc. It filled a three-ring binder notebook.

A survey conducted with colleagues around the country confirmed that the original fee was inadequate. This information was added to the new proposal, along with the detailed records the following year and the fee was tripled. The PTO unanimously approved the funding. A Local Massachusetts Cultural Council Grant was also submitted; and the PTO was assured that if the grant was accepted, their funding would be reimbursed. Grant funding was approved by the LCC, which made it a win/win situation. The Storytelling Troupe was funded and the school would now have additional money to offer more cultural art programs for the students.

## CHAPTER TWO

# *Laying the Foundation*

### **Researching Books and Website Sources**

There are many useful books to help guide your students through the storytelling process. In addition, there are new websites joining the Internet each day with good, solid information and resources.

Compile a short bibliography to go along with your proposal, and share it with the teachers. They may be interested in using storytelling to augment their lesson plans. Does the school have an employee email system? If you have access or can gain access, it is as simple as emailing the teachers and dropping the Internet links into the email; all they have to do is point and click. Make it as easy as possible for the teachers in your school system, and it will strengthen your program.

### **Linking with the Curriculum**

- Discuss various options for the troupe and coaching time.
- Offer the teachers websites on how to use storytelling in the curriculum.
- Find projects for the art teachers that connect with storytelling.
- Locate useful storytelling websites teachers can use during their computer time. Is there a free period when you can bring the students to the lab to view the sites?
- Meet with the school librarian. When is a convenient time to bring the students in to research the 398.2 section?
- Is there a language teacher? Perhaps some of your students can learn and share a folktale from that culture, incorporating some of the foreign words.

- Is there an oral history project the students are working on? Provide Web links and book suggestions for the teachers.

One year I approached Abbi, the art teacher, to suggest that my story-telling students select a scene from their story to draw. She went above and beyond! The school had just purchased a kiln for the art room; Abbi taught the students to paint their chosen scene onto a tile and then fired it in the kiln. At that time the main corridor walls in the school were lined with plain tiles. Abbi received the principal's permission to remove specific tiles and replace them with the student's art work. It was such a success that in the following years it was repeated again and again. Now, the main corridors of the school are lined with the beautiful story tiles.

### Culture Connections

Each student must research one interesting fact from the country where their story takes place. During class they stand up in front of the group and share their new-found fact. *[Connects with the social studies and English curriculum, and fosters oral presentation skills.]*

### Collage of Cultures

Students use magazines to find pictures that relate to their stories. The teacher then types the title of the story, culture and teller's name on a card and places it beneath the collage. Collages are displayed around the performance space during the festival. *[Connects with the art curriculum.]*

I did this with my students using large 11-by-14 sheets of paper.

When completed they hung in the walls of the auditorium during the Storytelling Festival and the students brought their families around to view their work. While the larger pieces were beautiful they took too long to complete; it would be easier using 8-by-10 sheets.

### Mapping the Stories

Purchase a large, flat map of the world. You can purchase them at Staples.com. Have students locate the country of origin in their story and place a colorful pushpin at the location. The map is displayed during the festival to highlight the vast array of cultures highlighted in the program. *[Connects with the social studies curriculum.]*

*Find more curriculum connections at the end of the book.*

## Rubrics

If your storytelling program is part of the curriculum, you may be required to design a rubric for administration evaluation. Even if this isn't a requirement, rubrics can be useful for both you and your students to assess their progress throughout the sessions.

Based on my acronym for the word APPLAUSE (No. 2 in Appendices) it complements the Applause Award the students receive at the end of their final storytelling festival. Illinois storyteller Sue Black also designed a rubric around the acronym for the word SMILE (No. 3 in Appendices).

## Meeting With Teachers and Students

Meet with the teachers and students a few weeks before the troupe begins to outline the goals of the Storytelling Troupe and some of the activities. Outline goals and expected level of commitment. Provide a sample announcement and registration form (No. 4 in Appendices). When the forms are returned, meet with the teachers to review their student choices if applicable.

In 2002 my Storytelling Troupe met during the school day, and additional time out of the classroom was required for coaching and performances. Therefore, the teachers selected the students. It was important for the students be able to maintain their school work with all of the extra time out of class. Once selections were made, an acceptance note was sent home (No. 5 in Appendices).

Now that the troupe meets after school, teacher approval is no longer necessary. However, an informational meeting for the students is still held at the beginning of the school year. Registration and parental permission is required.

The first year the number of students participating was limited to 10 from each grade level. The second year it was opened up to a wider number of students. Through the years, the popularity of the program continued to grow. It is no longer unusual to have 28 students from each grade level. If possible, have an assistant work with you.

### **Keeping the Lines of Communication Open**

Since the first year was a trial run, it was important to keep the lines of communication open with the teachers and administration. A weekly teacher report (No. 6 in Appendices) on the Storytelling Troupe was submitted, which outlined what the students learned, the activities shared, and how their story selections were progressing. Copies were sent to the following:

- principal
- teachers of storytelling students
- parent teacher organization (PTO)

### **Designing a Troupe Logo**

To spotlight the weekly reports and any parent notifications, a logo for the troupe was designed using basic Print Shop and Microsoft Word Clip Art. If possible, ask the students to design their own logo. Since every school sends home numerous notices, make sure it is eye catching and printed on bright paper.

### **Selecting a Troupe Name**

A school-wide contest was held. Each class came up with some titles for the troupe and then voted for their favorite. The favorite from each class was submitted, and the entire school voted on their choice from the list. The student who produced the winning title received a free classroom performance and a basket of storytelling CDs, courtesy of many generous storytelling colleagues. In a lovely bit of serendipity, the winning student who thought of the name, the Story Explorers, was a student in Lisa's classroom, the teacher who originally supported the start of the program. While the contest took some time and effort, it really rallied the students around the program and gave them a sense of ownership.