

**The American Association for Theatre in Higher Education/American Alliance for Theatre in Education Joint Conference: Risking Innovation**  
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**Abstract:** As an outgrowth of a drama group at Meadowlark Hills Retirement Community, group of older adults created stories about growing up during the Depression which they shared in storytelling sessions with classes of elementary school students in Manhattan, Kansas. Teachers were excited by the first-person connections about history that were made with their students, as well as the intergenerational component, children learned what it was like growing up seventy years ago, and the storytellers enjoyed passing on their life experiences to a younger generation.

**Intergenerational Theatre: Blending Ages/Creating Connections  
Storytelling to Connect the Generations**

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I direct the drama therapy program at Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS. For the past 2 years my drama therapy students and I have been leading a drama group at Meadowlark Hills Retirement Community.

The first summer we created an improvisational mystery dinner theatre, which we presented in the on-site restaurant to great acclaim. In the fall semester we improvised and recorded a radio play entitled “Dry Gulch Capers or How the West Was Lost.” In the spring a couple of students facilitated a series of sessions that were more free flowing and improvisational in nature, as well as interviewing a number of the group members for a non-fiction play about growing old which was entitled “It Ain’t All that Bad.” We were able to present “It Ain’t All That Bad” twice in a reader’s theatre format for the Governor’s Conference on Aging in May 2008.

While I like to introduce new artistic techniques and forms to groups that I think will offer them useful educational or therapeutic benefits, I am very participant-centered in the work that I do – I really feel that it must be relevant and meaningful to them. So, in listening to the feedback about which dramatic activities of our first year together were most enjoyed, I noticed several things:

They really enjoyed intergenerational interactions

- Loved working with my students and

- the more I could get to be in the group, the better
- Loved the performance aspect of the Murder Mystery
- Wanted to have an end product of some kind.

However, there were worries about

- memorization
- and for those who have vision problems – seeing and moving around safely

I've known about the storytelling work that StageBridge Theatre in Oakland, CA has done and thought that maybe a storytelling project might fulfill the need for contact with younger generations, performance, and a end project without the worries of memorization, since great storytelling is not memorized, but shared improvisationally...and storytelling from a seated position works well!

My plan was to approach the teachers in the elementary schools in the Manhattan, Kansas area and arrange for storytelling engagements. We didn't want to put our actors into an overwhelming situation in a BIG cafeteria with the whole school watching. I wanted them to be able to have an intimate experience with one classroom of children...for the benefit of the children as well as the storytellers!

Beginning in the fall of last year my graduate students and I started teaching storytelling techniques through brainstorming, discussion, and games. We worked in small groups and one-on-one to help each actor decide on a story he or she would like to tell. It was left open for them to choose a traditional tale or to tell a tale from their lives growing up. All chose to tell a tale from their life... although a few of them ended up being tall tales!

Each person came up with an outline of the story with help from us, practiced telling the story during the week between drama groups, and then when they felt ready, would tell the story to all of us. The rest of us listened and gave feedback. When the story had been told at least once and been revised, we videotaped them, so the teller could see and hear himself.

We also began looking for visuals to go along with the story. Our audience would be a generation that has grown up on television, so I felt that we needed something concrete for them to focus on while they were listening. Internet photo searches came up with some good illustrations of animals or machines or places involved in the stories...and one of our storytellers had slides from her travels that we were able to scan and print out from the computer. The photos – enlarged to about 8 ½ by 11 – were mounted on colorful poster board with doublestick tape. Using my color printer and buying a number of sheets of poster board ended up being a very inexpensive way to solve the need for visual aids.

Toward the end of November everyone had told their story several times and were ready for a real audience, BUT as it was getting close to holiday time and classrooms were very busy! I didn't want to wait until the new year to get them performing, because I didn't want the storytellers to get "cold feet." They were worried that no one would be interested in hearing their story. Luckily the high school drama teacher graciously agreed to let us bring our storytellers into her drama classes on several different days – so everyone could do what I called a "dress rehearsal" of their story. We framed the situation as a dress rehearsal because our listeners were students of drama who had stage experience and would be able to provide a willing and educated eye to the storytellers' performances.

The high school students actually had very little to say after the stories – except that they liked them! The storytellers felt relieved that they had been able to tell their story without forgetting it AND that the audience had actually paid attention the whole time! And, of course, their adrenalin kicked in and they had a great time!

I was able to make contact with teachers at a number of the elementary schools with the help of the community theatre which regularly makes contact with the PTA representatives and through a few friends of mine who were mothers of elementary school children. Beginning in January and running through April we had about 2 storytellers go out to a classroom each week. Everyone had the

opportunity to go out at least 4 times – and sometimes while at a school would tell their story twice to different classes.

Many of our stories fit in perfectly with the social studies or history subjects the children were covering in school. A lot of our stories were about growing up during the Great Depression. We had a story about:

- Poor John the Mule.
- Being in a dust storm.
- What it was like to live by the railroad (and how hobos rode the rails and would come by and beg food)
- Growing up without TV and making your own fun by creating “shows” in the basement.
- One of our storytellers had traveled all over the world, so her story was about her visit to the Galapagos Islands as an adult.
- Another story segued from a tale about spending time with a favorite dog into a magical encounter with leprechauns and fairies in the back pasture!

The children were fascinated! We had comments like

- “I think your story gets an A!”
- “I really liked the story. Especially the part about when you were riding Poor John and you were yelling for her to stop and let you off. She must have heard you because she went under a low tree branch and knocked you off backwards!”
- “I loved about the Dust Storm of 1932. It was cool!”
- “I like when the dust came through the window!”
- “It was interesting how people walked along the railroad to pick up coal to fuel their houses.
- “I liked how your mom was so generous by giving the hobos food.”

- “I think we all liked hearing about the hobos and their secret signs!”
- “I liked listening to this story because it painted a picture in my mind.”
- “When you talked about the sea turtles I liked it and a week later in our reading books our story was about sea turtles.”
- “My favorite part was when the bird landed on your shoulder.”

They even expressed how it gave them an important – and missed – intergenerational experience in their lives:

- “You made me think of my grandpa.”
- “Thank you! I love the senior citizens!”
- When can you come back and tell us more stories?

Teachers appreciated the interactions as much for the intimate personal connections that were made, as for the stories’ content:

- This has helped the children to understand a little about older generations.
- It helped them to become more polite at listening. They need lots of practice with listening skills.
- I consider our seniors an invaluable resource to the past – a wonderful tool for teaching young students.
- It was great for the kids to hear real life experience of what life was like when the storytellers were their age. Kids in today’s society have no comprehension of how life has changed in the last 10 years, much less 50!
- It was especially great for the kids that no longer have grandparents alive or near them to spend time with.
- Skills that were talked about by the storytellers corresponded with what we are learning including globes, equators, hemispheres, sea turtles, setting, speaking skills...as you can tell, it related to many different subjects.

In March we did a storytelling concert at Meadowlark Hills Retirement community for our storytellers' peers. At first the storytellers thought, "No one is going to want to come and hear our stories – they are for children! They'll feel like we are talking down to them!" But we convinced them that it would show what they had been doing all year *and* might even encourage more people to join the storytelling group. Instead of using our mounted pictures for this, we translated our images onto a PowerPoint which blew up large enough for everyone to see. And the community room where we performed had a sound system with 2 microphones so everyone could hear.

The responses from their peers were enthusiastic, too! We provided a questionnaire for feedback and got comments like:

- "It brought back so many memories."
- "I really related to the story of putting on a show. I did that when I was a girl."
- "I liked the dust storm story, probably because I lived through it also. I could recall experiences in my own life which were similar to all the others."
- "Being a birder, I loved hearing about the Galapagos Islands!"

After each school performance teachers had their students write thank you notes, which were always decorated with drawings based on the stories. We brought them to the weekly drama group to share and celebrate the experience as we talked about ways to make each story better and more effective the next time.

As the school year came to an end, the group decided to take the summer off. But before we ended, we asked them what **THEY** had gotten out of their storytelling experiences. We got responses that sound like they are right out of a textbook on healthy aging and reminiscence therapy:

- "It helps you to use your imagination and be in the moment."
- "Storytelling recalls memories you had forgotten and that is good. You recall things about yourself and get perspective on the past – where you have been...and you appreciate it in sharing it."

- “It has been therapeutic and I’d like to continue it.”
- “One child came up and hugged me around the knees – that was one of my favorite parts.”
- “It helps children to use their imagination since they rely so much on the television.”
- “Growth is the one word I have for the experience.”

When I asked them what they might like to work on this coming year, most of them said they loved the storytelling, but they also remembered their Mystery Dinner Theatre fondly...so I’ve got a new idea I’m going to float to the group in September...I’m thinking we could do some wonderful dramatic work if each person picks an historical character who they admire and works on bringing that character to life. With this we could go in a number of directions – going back into the classroom to introduce students to historical figures OR creating a play in which all of these character might interact to solve a common problem OR both!

Stay tuned for the next installment of “The Meadowlark Hills Players Present...”