

The Freetown Elementary Storytelling Club by Karen Chace

“Three apples fell from heaven:
one for the teller of the tale;
one for the listener;
and one for all the people of the world.”
Traditional Armenian ending for stories

Once upon a time....Isn't that how all wonderful stories begin? For twenty-two third and fourth grade students at the Freetown Elementary School in Massachusetts, the story continues. In October, twelve fourth grade students and their storytelling coach began a brand new ten week program, The FES Storytelling Club. Since then, ten excited third graders have joined our team to learn and experience the ancient art of storytelling.

Our adventure began with a discussion of the different types of stories, how tales travel from one culture to another, the power of listening and of course sharing some stories about ourselves. In the weeks that followed the student's played games which strengthened our storytelling team, demonstrated the use of voice, intonation, body language, visualization, and gesture, and even learned how to tell a story without using any words.

Part of our journey included a visit to the Land of Stories, the Freetown Elementary School library. These intrepid explorers went in search of fables, myths, fairytales, folktales and legends. They took great care in finding just the right tale, one they could wrap their imaginations around and bring from the page to the stage. In the process they discovered that a storyteller does not pick the story, the story picks them!

A storyteller does not memorize a story but is encouraged to find words and images to make the story their own. During one of the sessions the children used their drawing skills to storyboard their tales. By segmenting a story into a series of visual cues, they “see” and feel the story, and experience it in their minds-eye.

When the students can taste the individual ingredients of their story, they can begin experimenting with its flavors and offer others a taste. They broke their stories down into pieces, added their own brand of spice, and were soon ready to serve it up for every one to enjoy; but one ingredient was missing. So they began to share their stories with the other club members. This became an important part of our story-coaching sessions. With guidance, they offered gently critiques of each others' performance following Doug Lipman's coaching technique of Affirmations and Suggestions. The tellers were in charge; they could decide whether or not they wanted to hear their classmates' comments. No student refused to hear commentary, as they

instinctively knew this was another way to improve their performance. They listened attentively and respectfully to suggestions on pacing, voice, gesture and eye contact.

One of the most exciting parts of the Storytelling Club was when we began to practice with the microphone, a virtual magic wand for the students. Even the most soft spoken child suddenly blossoms into a naturally confident speaker once it is clipped into place. The transformations are amazing and the students quickly realized more than just the power of expression; they learn to control and utilize verbal expression

At the completion of the group session, with teacher support, I met with each child for individual coaching sessions. Working one on one, they listened to themselves on a tape recorder, watched themselves on video, and we discussed how they wanted to further improve their stories. Utilizing suggestions and feedback, as well as self evaluation, they tailored the stories to fit their specific needs and telling style. Our next goal was taking the show "on the road."

By February the fourth grade students had entertained their fellow classmates and graduated to sharing their enthusiasm and talents with other classes of students. With each show, the storyteller's gained confidence and expressively shared their original thoughts through a personally selected story with an audience of their peers. Our final goal is a Storytelling Festival for parents and friends at the end of the school year in June of 2003. After all, the best stories end with "*and they lived, happily ever after!*"

Biography

Karen Chace, a professional teller, has presented her workshop, Researching Stories on The Internet at conferences around the country. She is the author of the CD, Researching Stories on the Internet: A Webliography of Storytelling Resources

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