I see the story when I hear it,” says an excited fourth grader from Gardens Elementary School. Stories are fundamental to the way humans communicate with one another. “Give students a microphone and an audience, [and] you’ll hear the ancient art of storytelling come alive,” explains Vicki Lenio, assistant principal of the Pasadena, Texas, school.

Common Core State Standards point out that students who are college- and career-ready have robust communication skills, including the ability to respond to various audiences and the ability to comprehend as well as critique content. Storytelling is a powerful medium that builds 21st century learners’ communication, collaboration, creative, and critical thinking skills. There are numerous ways educators can help children hone the art of storytelling and celebrate giving children another voice.

Benefits for Teachers and Students

In Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins (2007), author Annette Simmons explains the universal need to communicate through stories. A story—like art—is a voice that commands attention. In her guide, Using Art in Training, Simmons provides adults a visual voice in professional development and reminds them of an insight children already know: “Art can create a safe place for dangerous truths and open the door to seeing.” Stories and art are “two of humans’ best gifts for self-expression and gathering insights,” she writes. Slowly the teachers’ stories changed from “I’m Afraid to Draw” to “I Really Am Creative—I Just Didn’t Realize It.”

As for the students, storytelling and art are used to immerse them in the community’s rich history and empower them to share it, explains Brown. The school’s partnership with the Worcester Historical Museum, Massachusetts Cultural Commission, and the Worcester Arts Council has helped Brown and Hickey accomplish this. “People who have lived in this community their entire lives were dazzled by our students, dressed in period costumes, telling the stories of our town’s contributions to the nation. We all learned things we did not know before,” Brown says. Crafting stories and settings where the drama unfolded deeply immersed students in Worcester’s proud cultural heritage. Students worked on large-scale art assemblages based on Worcester architecture, and developed their characters’ stories based on the history they learned.

Crafting Characters

The choices children make as they create characters help them create and attribute personality traits and develop plots for stories. James Sealey and Robin Jones, principal and assistant principal at Country Oaks Elementary School in LaBelle, Florida, found that all students, especially the reluctant writers, gained plot fluency and character insights if they started the story-writing process by sketching or modeling a character. The process begins with students making character sculptures in the art room. “As they mold the character, paint, and name it, they tell classmates the flow of their story—who the hero is, what happened, why, and what’s next,” Jones explains. Before the first word is written, these students have developed the entire story based on their handcrafted creatures.

Country Oaks art teacher Stella Luckey “has a gift for extracting descriptive details from children’s imaginations,” says Jones, “so when they return to their classroom to transfer their stories to paper, a complex plot with rich vocabulary, based on the hero’s personality, has been woven into the oral stories they told in the art studio.”

Churchill Road Elementary School in McLean, Virginia, also found magical connections when students visualized characters. Principal Don Hutzel and art teacher Jenny Whiteman
report their goal was to “deepen students’ understanding of characters’ connections to historical context.” Whiteman says that teachers read stories out loud to first graders without showing them the illustrations to build students’ listening skills. The students are tasked with listening for visual clues and illustrating the characters in settings based on the words heard. Comparisons, first to classmates’ drawings and then to the illustrator’s images, helped students attune listening skills as they extracted meaningful visual clues from oral storytelling.

Fourth graders at the school engaged in storytelling, too. They both listened to and presented stories about their ancestors. To begin, students interviewed relatives to hear personal ancestry migration stories. “Today there is so much information available online; we must consciously remember to teach students oral interview and storytelling skills,” Whiteman says. Then, based on the stories they heard, students sketched their families and presented migration stories out loud. “Visualizing the stories and conveying them to others tied directly to state standards,” Whiteman adds.

Dramatic Storytelling
While the fourth graders at Churchill Road Elementary shared stories on heritage, students at Mountain Island Charter School in Mount Holly, North Carolina, participated in dramatic, imaginative storytelling and presented original work to an audience of families and peers. Their assignment was to focus on character development — using illustrations and descriptive words to express character motivations and interactions.

John Truby, author of The Anatomy of Story (2008) and adviser to master storytellers and screen writers, recommends that individuals focus on character interaction to enrich their stories. Thus, urge students to develop a web of characters, including friends and foes that add dimension to the story’s plot. Beth Keller, principal of Mountain Island Charter School, says that during the exercise, students developed more sophisticated ways of providing character insights to listeners. For example, they added inner dialogue so listeners could hear what characters were thinking, as well as what they said to other characters. “Sketching characters and orally telling their stories helps children build vocabulary and self-expression skills — all part of figuring out who we are and how we fit in the world,” she adds.

Validate Their Voices
More than 450 people attended Gardens Elementary’s Family Art and Literacy Night, an event where “we help families see the interconnection between visuals and stories,” explains Lenio. “Together, parents and children illustrate and orally present stories.” Lenio credits this high attendance to the powerful experience of parents actively engaging in the creative process.

Her advice to students is to “create a story around something you know well and feel deeply about. Draw your audience in with a passionate description that paints the picture for them.”

Lenio recalls a student who followed this advice and chose her parents’ divorce as inspiration for her story: “There wasn’t a dry eye in the room when she told her story. . . . This child’s experience in with a passionate description that paints the picture for them.”

Art is a provocative medium that stirs the imagination. Storytelling, one of the most ancient art forms, uses carefully chosen words to paint a picture. Lenio cares deeply about this topic and hopes to draw more school leaders with her passion. “Students’ voices deserve to be seen and heard,” she says.

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