

Story Quilts:

Communicating Content and Creating Connections

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Creating a story quilt is a powerful and alternative way for students to demonstrate understanding of social studies content. This article describes the use of story quilts in elementary school classrooms at three different grade levels. In each unit of study, the teacher devoted, on average, three to four weeks to guiding students as they created a story quilt related to a social studies topic.¹

A First Grade Example: Community Connections

In keeping with the Colorado State Standards for social studies instruction in the first grade, Allison Sampish and the culturally diverse students in her Longmont, Colorado, classroom created a story quilt that examined the importance of community and community involvement.² This project aligned with the national social studies curriculum strand **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**.³ Allison also felt a distinct need to help her students understand how individuals depend upon their community and help to create it. She used her classroom to define and develop the concept of community. Indeed, for many of her students, the classroom offered a rare space where they felt safe and secure enough to contribute to something larger than themselves. For Allison and the students, community was a topic they returned to and worked on throughout the year.

First, students investigated their own classroom community, discovering the various strengths, abilities, and knowledge of each student. Allison created myriad opportunities in writer's workshop settings and class-meeting share time for the students to discuss and describe the unique contributions each student made to their first grade community. She then "publicized" each child's strengths on the classroom walls, categorizing students as "super mathematicians," "great listeners," "terrific readers" or "artists." This information allowed the students to comprehend the diverse abilities among their peers, as well as the ways in which they could rely upon each other. It wasn't long before

Allison noticed students seeking out their peer "experts" in the room almost as often as they sought her assistance in their academic learning, social situations, and creative dilemmas.

Second, Allison and the students discussed this newfound classroom interdependence and used the discussion to define their community as "a place where everybody could bring their talents together to help others. Using this shared definition, Allison extended the class examination of community into the neighborhood surrounding the school. She began this process by first brainstorming with the students everything they knew about community members outside the school. Allison also provided texts and websites that would allow the students to explore the diversity of workers, jobs, and needs within a given community.

People in Your Neighborhood

Finally, Allison and the students decided to collect information about community members by inviting adults into the classroom to talk about their work. In the end, the students and Allison interviewed more than 20 different community members, including police officers, professors, civil engineers, accountants, advertising executives, social workers and many others. Each guest speakers conveyed a distinct sense of responsibility toward the community and gave the students a clearer sense of the diverse actors and needs within the larger community.

Allison and her students summarized each visit on a Community Members Chart. Even so, Allison was not satisfied that the chart adequately conveyed the idea that the community actually formed because people worked to meet the needs of the whole. So she conceived of a story quilt that would allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the work of community members. Once completed, it would also be a visual metaphor for the interdependence she hoped the students would see as essential to the notion of community.



With a limited classroom budget, Allison turned to the Longmont Quilting Guild, a neighborhood-quilting group of women and men passionate about quilts and quilting.⁴ Through a grant program offered by the Guild, Allison secured funding for cloth, markers, and small irons (which are used with heat-sensitive glue) as well as the participation of two adult volunteers with strong quilting experience.

Interdependence

Allison asked each of the students to select a community member from the classroom chart whom they found interesting and believed important to the community. Each student received a 12"×12" quilting square made of plain muslin fabric. Using their fabric markers, each student created a drawing of his or her chosen community member in action and a brief written description of that person's work and responsibilities. Allison and adult volunteers helped each student draft a design for the square and correct any spelling errors. After a couple days of work, the students had completed 20 "community members" quilting squares that depicted, among others, a grocery store clerk, an ambulance driver, and an engineer.

For the actual construction of the quilt, Allison then handed over the squares to the members of the Quilting Guild. Two weeks later, the class had its completed quilt.

The classroom unveiling of the completed Community Story Quilt was a cause for celebration. It also provided a rich opportunity to discuss connections between the quilt, the quilting experience, and the definition of community. Students noted that the quilt "held together" because all of the squares were connected. This realization allowed Allison to revisit and reinforce the notion of interdependence as the defining characteristic of a community. With this reiteration, the students seemed to truly understand and take ownership of the concept. Indeed, they pushed the quilt-as-metaphor-for community further, noticing the fact that the quilt required the class to work with other community members (the Quilting Guild) for its completion. "Yes," Allison replied, "this quilt is here because you used your drawing skills and the quilting women used their sewing skills." Like a community, the quilt only existed because a variety of people (guest speakers, students, Allison, and the Guild volunteers) were involved in its creation.

A Third Grade Example: Voting Matters

In the fall of 2008, the presidential election was, to put it mildly, a topic of energetic conversations—even among the third grade students in Maria Barnes’s class in Kernersville, North Carolina, a rural community located just north of Greensboro. Now, it is probably the case that every presidential election generates discussion and excitement among elementary-aged kids, but the relatively young age (47) of the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, combined with the possibility he offered for becoming the first black U.S. president, served only to heighten the students’ enthusiasm. Like many states, North Carolina’s social studies curriculum follows the expanding environments model, with the third grade content standards centering on issues of citizenship and civic involvement.⁵ The election also provided an authentic means to connect a current event to the national standards curriculum theme **Ⓢ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**. It also provided the basis for the story quilt that Marie and her students would create.

The aim of Maria’s classroom quilt was to create a persuasive visual “argument” about the importance of voting and elections. To get the students thinking about electoral participation, Maria created a PowerPoint presentation on the logistics of going to the polls, the history of voting rights in the United States, and controversies surrounding suffrage. The presentation covered the basics of the election process including election dates, the difference between the popular and electoral vote, and the requirements that candidates must satisfy in order to run for president. Maria also used the presentation to examine current voting rights as well as the Constitutional Amendments that were passed to extend suffrage more widely—to women, people of color, and young adults 18 years or older.

A National Holiday?

Maria also had the students investigate books and online sources dedicated to voting, registering to vote, and increasing voter turnout. She then used resources at Micropoll.com allowing students to voice their opinion on this topic: Should Election Day be designated a National Holiday? Beyond the enthusiasm for a potential day-off from school, students were fairly unanimous in their opinion that a national election-day holiday would surely increase the numbers of participating voters. Maria then drew on students’ concerns by asking each student to compose a letter to an eligible voter, encouraging him or her to participate in the upcoming election. Students wrote letters to parents, community members, and even to Maria herself. One student wrote, “It is important that we vote so that we have a say in who our leader is.... I hope you understand now how important it is that we vote.”

These letters provided a perfect segue to the creation of the Voting Matters Story Quilt—a “public service announcement” about the power of voting. While the students were too young

to participate in the actual presidential election, there was no shortage of adults in the school (or who regularly passed through the school) who could. Moreover, the school was holding a mock presidential election allowing students to make known their choice for the 44th president. The quilt spoke to the civic involvement of both constituencies—adults and younger students.

A Civic Duty

To create the quilt, Maria gave each student a set of fabric markers and an 8” × 8” square of plain muslin fabric. Their task was to create a quilting square extolling the virtues of voting and reminding adult and student voters of the need to participate in the electoral process. The students illustrated these squares with images of Uncle Sam and other patriotic characters and calls to “Vote Here!” (the school served as a local polling place), admonitions to “Vote If You Can!” and exclamations to “VOTE Today!” When they had finished, Maria ironed each of the students’ squares to a larger bolt of muslin. The resulting Voting Matters Story Quilt assumed a prominent place in the main hallway of the school for the entire fall semester, testifying the virtues of voting to students and the larger school community. Indeed, the story quilt is displayed the hallway to remind students of their duty to participate in student elections, and adults to vote in local elections every two years.

A Fifth Grade Example: The Immigration Experience

In Colorado, immigration is an issue that gets a lot of coverage on the nightly news and in local newspapers. The ongoing controversy over illegal immigration is a constant reminder of the decidedly contested notion of the United States as “A Nation of Immigrants.” Our fourth grade history textbook documents the long history of Mexican and Spanish occupation of the land that is today the State of Colorado.⁶

Even though the fifth graders in Katie Webb’s Louisville, Colorado, classroom were aware of these issues in relation to their state, they had little knowledge about their nation’s long history of immigration and its complications. More important, these 21st century kids from largely middle-upper middle class backgrounds had virtually no prior knowledge or exposure to the actual lives, hopes, and struggles associated with the immigrant experience of our own time. The story quilt from this classroom recorded the journey Katie’s students took to understand these aspects of American immigration.

Colorado State Standards declare that history instruction in the fifth grade should center on the significant events that figure in the formation and evolution of the United States of America.⁷ The topic of massive European emigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries certainly fit these criteria. It also connected nicely with the national standards curriculum theme **Ⓢ TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**.

Story Quilting in History: “Did It Actually Happen?”

Lively and, at times, heated discussion followed when historians examined statements made in children’s literature about historical quilts. Are these juvenile books teaching history—or myth? Elementary educators should be aware of these controversies and either avoid books and websites that appear to contain unsubstantiated information, or bring children into the discussion by describing the controversy in terms that are appropriate for the grade level. See, for example,

Bresler, Joel. “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” www.followthedrinkinggourd.org.

Holmes, Kristin E. “Did Quilts Play a Part in Underground Railroad?” www.philly.com/philly/news/local/84762267.html.

McMillion, Pat. “Letter to the Editor: Quilts and the Underground Railroad”; Ava L. McCall, “Response,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 15, no. 4 (March/April 2003): 5.

Stukin, Stacie. “Unravelling the Myth of Quilts and the Underground Railroad,” (April 2007), www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1606271,00.html.

“The Secret Code of Quilts,” which provides an uncritical presentation of the “quilts with codes for the Underground Railroad” thesis, is posted at the website of *Carolina Country*, a monthly consumer magazine, www.carolinacountry.com/storypages/our-stories/quilt/quilt3.html.

Background sources for teachers about quilts include

Dallas, Sandra. *The Quilt That Walked to Golden: Women and Quilts in the Mountain West—From the Overland Trail to Contemporary Colorado* (Elmhurst, IL: Breckling Press, 2007).

Kiracofe, Roderick and Mary Elizabeth Johnson. *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750-1950*. (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2004).

Meeke, Susan. “Quilt Me a Story,” in Kay Vandergrift, ed., *Ways of Knowing: Literature and the Intellectual Life of Children*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996).

Children’s books that use quilts in the telling include

Hopkinson, Deborah. *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. Albuquerque, NM: Dragonfly, 1995.

Polacco, Patricia. *The Keeping Quilt*. New York: Aladdin, 2001.

Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*. Albuquerque, NM: Dragonfly Books, 1996. See also *Cassie’s Word Quilt* by the same author.

Stroud, Bettye. *The Patchwork Path: A Quilt Map to Freedom*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 2007.

Family Groups

Katie began her class’s investigation by randomly assigning the 24 students into six groups of four students each. She told each group that it represented a family immigrating to the United States from another nation (Russia, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Germany, or Greece) during the late 1800s. Katie provided the students with some general information, via texts and websites, regarding this movement of immigrants, but also required that the students conduct their own research. Each group’s specific task was to uncover as much information as it could about the “average” family from its assigned country, including religion, language, customs, eating habits, style of dress, and the reasons why such a family might want to immigrate to America.

A role-playing exercise had the students preparing for and arriving at Ellis Island. To recreate some of the realities of the trans-Atlantic journey, Katie asked each “family” to make a list of all their original possessions. Then she gave each family just one suitcase, forcing them to choose which few items would make the trip. She asked the students to justify their choices.

Upon their arrival at “Ellis Island,” each family encountered an immigration official (the teacher) who spoke a different language. Families faced a barrage of paperwork, including confusing registration procedures and health inquiries. At the end this daunting process, families learned their fates: some were sent back to their home countries, some were detained at the Island, and some were granted admission to the United States—but a customs agent changed the spelling and pronunciation of their family name!

Symbols and Metaphors

Students’ research about immigrant families and the role-play prepared them for the culminating activity: the creation of the Immigration Experience Story Quilt. Katie asked each family to document the most important memory that their immigrant “family” might want to preserve on the story quilt. The students created quilting squares containing written and illustrated representations of important religious symbols, nationalist sentiments (for their original country as well as for their adopted nation), cultural celebrations, family names and traditions, motives for immigrating, and so on.

In class discussions, Katie emphasized the ways in which the creation and content of the story quilt captured immigrant feelings and experiences. The art symbolically represented the historical and contemporary balance of “unity and diversity in American society.” Indeed, each student’s individual quilting square reflected a particular aspect of the story of American immigration from the perspective of an “average” citizen. As a kind of “peoples quilt,” the completed work depicted the struggles and aspirations of diverse immigrant groups.

Katie used the quilt to open up discussions about the language barriers and cultural differences that face immigrants today, as well as the hopes and aspirations that keep people striving for U.S. citizenship. Story quilts not only strengthened students’



and the Immigration Quilt hang on the classroom walls and provide, respectively, a powerful visual metaphor for community interdependence and a symbolic analogy for the continual and necessary tensions between mutuality and diversity in American history and current society. Likewise, the Voting Quilt occupies a place in the school hallway, reminding current and future voters of one duty of citizenship. Across these classrooms, story quilts not only complemented social studies instruction, they provided a unique means to extend and deepen the students' connection to the topics and concepts at hand. 🌐

Notes

1. For the past five years, Brian has used the creation of story quilts in his Elementary Social Studies Methods course to examine the social significance of quilting throughout American history. Teachers enrolled in the course read and discuss the history and questions surrounding story quilts as well as their aesthetic and communicative potential in the elementary classroom. These discussions set the stage for the creation of an in-class story quilt, which allows the teachers to experience how this art form can provide a powerful and expressive means for elementary students to demonstrate *their* understanding of social studies content. Many teachers then immediately conceive unique ways to use story quilts with students to address state and national social studies standards.
2. "Colorado Model Content Standards for Civics," (1998), www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/documents/OSA/standards/civics.htm.
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
4. "Longmont Quilt Guild," Longmont, Colorado, www.longmontquiltguild.org.
5. "Third Grade Citizenship," (2008), www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/socialstudies/scos/2003-04/027thirdgrade
6. Matthew Downey, *Colorado: Crossroads of the West* (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing, 1999).
7. "Colorado Model Content Standards for History," (1995), www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/documents/OSA/standards/hist.htm.
8. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum, 2001): 171-190.

research skills, they connected the lives of past immigrants with those that make today's headlines. The quilt also served as an alternative metaphor to that of the nation as a "melting pot," in which individual and cultural characteristics are lost in the mixing. Once they are joined together as one quilt (one nation), the individual squares (diverse citizens) maintain their integrity and uniqueness, yet function as one piece of the fabric.

Connection and Communication

Within each of these classrooms (first third, and fifth grades), story quilts encouraged students to use and express their unique creative abilities while engaging in the "doing of social studies."⁸ Unlike a typical assignment in an art class, these story quilts take full advantage of the communicative power of the quilt to deepen students' connection to content. The Community Quilt

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