

Culture Tools
Building Community Through Folk Arts
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Playing & Learning With Folk Arts

Notes on folk arts projects taught by FACTS teacher (and artist/activist) Eric Joselyn

The Proverb Project

1. Introduction and context: What are proverbs? Begin with definitions of folk arts (from FACTS) that students are provided.* All people have histories and experiences that they share in different ways. Then to language: there are lots of ways that we pass on ways of talking, use other peoples' words to make our own points and to say things. Introduce the term "proverb" and give working definitions. All peoples have some shared commonalities, but there are many different traditions and ways of talking. Proverbs are a genre (or recognizable type) of folk speech common in many cultures (but not all).

2. Explore examples of proverbs. Who has ever heard of "don't count your chickens before they're hatched"? Have you ever heard someone say it, or something like that? "A book contains a house of gold" is a commonly heard proverb in many Chinese families. Get kids in discussion mode. Generate and record proverbs kids have heard, or heard of. Ask: Who did you hear it from? Responses tend to be adults / elders. Ask: Are there other things that you have heard more than once, from more than one source? Another prompt: If you are a kid and you do something foolish or dangerous, what have you been told by an aunt or an elder? Kids share these. Look for light bulbs of recognition from other kids.

3. Explore metaphor and symbol. Go back to chickens and hatching. Ask questions about this. Has anyone here raised chickens? Do you have them in your home? Why are people talking about chickens? Most people can trace our families back to some kind of country, rural or farm life in previous generations, times and places. These were times when people had more of a connection with animals in everyday life. If you are dealing with chickens (and other animals), what you observe in the animal world sometimes helps you to reflect on how people act. (Here, the aim is to help students make connections about how the natural world can anchor descriptions of life. This is a way in to explaining symbols and metaphors. The point is to show how you can be talking about one thing but also talking about something else.)

Then, go into particular proverbs – generated by kids or using teacher examples, i.e.: “Lay down with dogs, wake up with fleas.” What does this mean literally? When someone tells you this, what does it mean? What are they trying to tell you? Kids are asked to rephrase proverbs, in terms of how they are used; they are asked to use their own words to “translate” (or “gloss”) proverbs— explaining how proverbs are used to explain about / comment on bad choices, consequences, and so forth.

4. Build understanding of meanings and uses of proverbs. Back to universality: everybody uses proverbs and sayings. But we don’t always recognize one another’s sayings. We can read them, but (a lesson on specificity): we may not understand them. Some proverbs we hear and we don’t really know what is being said— unless we can study them, investigate them, put them in context. Do a survey of the room to show that everyone has proverbs but we don’t all know the same ones. As we get to know each other, we may exchange them.

5. Assignment: Proverb Documentation Project. Each kid is then charged with going out and interviewing an adult or an elder in their family or community to see if they can find someone who can share a proverb. [See worksheet]

Explain the worksheet. Model interviews to help kids know how to ask questions and be able to understand the task. Anticipate / prefigure some of the difficulties kids may have in asking/doing interviews.

6. Processing the assignment. Returned worksheets are collected and kids do selective sharing of different proverbs. Grouping student’s proverbs by geography (country/place of origin) helps to highlight context and history: Philadelphia, China, Vietnam, Cambodian, African American, European. Try to identify situations of origin: do some speculative analysis about what the proverbs mean. For example, with “Just because you hear thunder, don’t dump out the rain barrel,” peeling apart layers of what kids need to know to understand the proverbs they are hearing and sharing.

Kids then select one proverb they brought in, or one they heard others share, or one from the teacher’s collection of examples.

They then illustrate a proverb in terms of its particular context and geography of origin. First they develop sketches and get feedback on formal aspects of their sketch, i.e.: How do you translate this visually, for different groups? Kids can chose to be literal or symbolic /interpretive. Formal features they address include scale and composition (what do you want to emphasize by making it big or bold?), use of multiple images or montage structures, together building visual literacy.

Kids then execute the proverb illustrations.

7. Activity: Proverb Theater. Small teams did proverb theaters. Teams of 4-6 kids selected a particular proverb and presented it in dramatic form to the class. Some were literal. Some were symbolic/ interpretive. This activity helped kids to polish the meaning end of it: to say more about what proverbs are about. This resonated more with kids who are in middle school, for example dealing with social exclusion issues. They can find more contexts in which a proverb may apply. (For example, “Lead the donkey but beware of its rear.” They enjoyed literally acting it out— Girls in a mall dissing each other over a boy. They were able to dramatize common social interactions as bases and texts for proverbs.

8. Activity: School-wide Display. Finished proverb illustrations were displayed on the wall. There was some identification done, in terms of sources (people, and place of origin). Some proverbs were presented in the heritage language and translated into English.

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What are folk arts? Folk arts are names for the arts that we shape for ourselves, rather than learn in school or from formal institutions. Folk arts are rooted in community traditions, in collective experiences. This means that while individuals make up folklore, new stories, songs, or sayings, these arts endure because they name the experiences of many people. When we share stories at the end of the day, recall a proverb that gets to the heart of a situation, or eat traditional foods at holidays, we are using our own folk arts.
(<http://www.folkloreproject.org/programs/education/dancer/folkarts.cfm>)

Other resources:

National Council of Teachers of English (John Paul Waller): Proverbs: An Introduction (Grades 6-8):

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=184