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CURRENTS IN LITERACY

Sing a Song of Fables: Connecting Songwriting and Language Arts

By Louise Pascale

Integrate singing into my language arts curriculum? How would I do that? What could possibly be the intrinsic value? I need to teach to the Language Arts Standards. I need to prepare my students for the MCAS exams. I can't spend time singing with my students. There's not enough time in the day as it is. And besides, I can't really sing very well.

These are comments and concerns often expressed by educators when the idea of integrating the arts, particularly music, is put forth as a suggestion for enhancing literacy. If teachers have not had positive hands-on experiences with integrating musical activities into their daily classroom curriculum, even the suggestion of doing it can be overwhelming. The intent of this article is to address the value of music as a learning tool for teaching language arts skills by providing a specific example of a successful model of using songwriting as a vehicle for teaching a second grade unit on fables.

Singing in a classroom can have a powerful effect on students' emotional and physical energy as well as the overall classroom atmosphere. Singing together creates a feeling of unity. Everyone's voice is heard. Everyone is participating. Everyone is working together.

Writing a song together has its own specific value. It builds community. It directly connects to specific literacy instruction standards such as independent, interactive and guided writing; language expression; editing; shared reading; and reading aloud. Creating a class song becomes a communal and collaborative effort and everyone takes ownership of the final product.

Integrating musical activities, such as songwriting, into a language arts curriculum engages students through a different approach to learning. It is a well-known and accepted fact that students learn in a variety of ways. The majority of educators are now mindful of presenting lessons in ways that address many learning styles and individual intelligences. Including songwriting as part of a language arts lesson gives students the opportunity to express themselves, not only through written language but through rhythm and melody as well.

Students who struggle expressing themselves through linguistic modes of communication have a chance to experience success by exploring other modes of learning. For every student the essential life skills such as creative thinking, problem solving, and risk taking are enhanced. And most importantly, there is a myriad of ways to solve a problem. There is no single correct answer. Each student can participate successfully in the process and make an important contribution in creating the final product.

The Fable/Songwriting Project

Victor Cockburn, well-known musician, educator, and co-founder of the twenty-year-old non-profit organization, Troubadour, Inc. was recently invited to be a visiting artist at the Chandler Elementary School in Duxbury, Massachusetts. The teachers and administrators specifically requested he help them integrate music into their second grade unit on fables. I recently spoke with Victor about his Chandler Elementary School residency experience and he detailed the process of connecting songwriting to a unit on fables. The following narrative outlines the step-by-step method he implemented with the students and the teachers.

Songwriting and singing songs - particularly folksongs and the study of fables - have a natural connection to one another. Folksongs, or vernacular songs, are most often learned and passed on through an oral tradition. In an article Victor wrote in 1991 on "The Uses of Folk Music and Songwriting in the Classroom," he states,

A lullaby sung by a mother to a baby, a jump rope chant passed from fifth graders to third graders on a school playground, field and ship worker songs, and hymns passed on from elders to youth in places of worship are some examples of how songs communicate across generations and cultural boundaries. (Cockburn 1991, p. 56)

When I asked Victor about introducing the idea of songwriting to children, he said, "Children make up songs all the time in their heads. They're excited about the possibility of actually writing them down because often they are really good and if they aren't written down, they're forgotten."

It is Victor's experience working with children that almost every child in a class has something to say when it comes to writing a song. And because of their involvement with the process, they are very willing to write and put their ideas down on paper.

Summarizing, or retelling a story is, however, not an easy task for children. "I never go into a residency thinking it's easy," Victor said. "I always tell the students that writing a song will be fun and hard. We're going to get stuck and we're going to have problems and we're going to have to solve the problems. And the children still are excited and can hardly wait to get started."

A Model for Writing Songs with Students

Step One: Introduction to the Process with the Teachers

The first step Victor takes when he begins the Chandler Elementary residency is to schedule a meeting with the teachers. Without this step, Victor is convinced his residency cannot be successful. The teachers need to be involved in the process from the beginning. After all, the residency will involve their students and their curriculum.

Victor gets the teachers singing together right away, illustrating the ways in which singing "sharpens" their minds and bodies, energizing them simply by getting air into their lungs and flushing the blood and brain with oxygen!

He explains to the teachers the specific process and writing techniques he will use with their students to write a song in connection to a fable. It's a similar process to writing a story. The characters need to be introduced, the setting developed, the action and the climax of the story told, and, with this particular genre of story, the moral of the story included at the end. Throughout the process of working with the students, he consciously models the use and importance of specific language techniques such as simile and rhyming.

By the end of this introductory meeting with the teachers, they have a clear understanding of what will happen when Victor arrives in their classrooms. They have received resource materials and had the opportunity to have input into the process. Before his arrival, Victor asks each teacher to introduce the fables to their class and have the class select one fable for the songwriting project.

Step Two: Meeting the Students; The Writing Process Begins

All the fables used in this second grade unit are about animals acting like human beings. Victor begins his first meeting with the students in the same way he did with the teachers, by singing songs with them. He introduces the students to several folksongs about animals. After the students are warmed up to the idea of singing, and being involved and exposed to various styles of music and lyrics, he begins the process with writing.

The first task is to come up with the first line and see what happens. "First lines are great," says Victor. "The first line doesn't need to rhyme with anything. Everyone can think of something." And they do, he claims. Sometimes there are several first line suggestions and eventually the class selects one. From there, they begin to build a story. They introduce the characters, setting, and the action. They do this by creating four-line stanzas.

In this first session, which takes about fifty minutes, the class usually creates two verses or two verses and a chorus or refrain. They have enough involvement in the process to understand the rhythm of the line and the rhyming pattern. At this point there has not been any discussion about putting the words to music.

Step Three: Finalizing the Lyrics

In between visits, which are one to two weeks apart, Victor leaves the students and their teacher with the responsibility of completing the writing process on their own. He offers his assistance and support, via phone, fax, or e-mail if they are stuck, but in this case no one needs him!

Step Four: Adding the Melody

By the time Victor returns to the school, a week or two later, each class has finished writing their lyrics and Victor and the students begin the editing process. First, as a matter of ritual, they sing a few songs together. Then they begin working on their song by simply chanting the words together. Chanting is natural for the children. They chant all the time on the playground and are very familiar with the process. By chanting the lyrics, everyone begins to really listen to the rhythm of the words and hear what works and what doesn't work. "We are operating on two different levels at this point," Victor points out. "Listening and reading." The class makes editing suggestions, but in truth they are also eager to move on to the next step - putting their lyrics to music.

Victor uses two different methods to explore and create melodies:

1. Tune doodling. "Tune doodling" simply means to make up a melody to the words by speaking in a rather freestyle, haphazard way. Victor often models this idea for the class by "singing" sentences to them in a lyrical, playful manner. "With children at that age sometimes I get funny voices, highs and lows and the tune may go through several permutations in a matter of minutes but eventually the song will settle into a consistent, authentic, original melody," Victor says. He suggests that "tune doodling" be the first method tried to create a melody. Once a traditional tune is introduced, it is much more difficult to create an original melody.

Victor uses the term "tune doodling" with the students, although he points out that the more formal musical term is improvisation, "There are a number of reasons why "tune

doodling" is a very important process," Victor points out. "There is something very freeing about simply vocalizing the words in a "singsong" manner. Even the most hesitant, shy children (and adults) will give it a try. And most importantly, there is simply no way anyone can be wrong. That's the wonderful part of the creative process. The connection to the muse."

Victor is committed to involving the teachers in the total process and always requests that they try their hand (or voice, in this case) at "tune doodling." Victor feels strongly that when the students witness the teacher as someone who writes a song with them, who sings, who can make up a tune with them, a barrier has been broken down about the traditional role of music in the classroom and a significant change occurs. The classroom teacher is involved in the learning process alongside the students and is a model for the students. This total involvement builds a confidence for implementing future songwriting activities.

2. Using a traditional melody. The second method for creating a melody for the lyrics is to choose a well-known melody, such as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," "Skip to My Lou," etc. When using the melody of the traditional tune, the tune often needs to be shifted slightly to adjust to the different cadence of the lyrics, and the phrasing is usually altered a bit.

By the end of this session, the class has composed a song they can sing. The song is tape recorded so that the teacher and the students can listen, practice, and internalize the song for assisting in memorization of the lyrics and the melody.

As a part of this process, Victor always mentions to the students the importance of listening to all styles and forms of music from many different cultures. By doing that they will have many more "listening memories" to draw on when they begin to write a song.

Step Five: The Performance; Sharing with the Community

Victor feels strongly that you must have some kind of performance to debut the songs and introduce them to the community. In this residency, all of the second graders and their teachers perform their songs for members of the school community and parents. Each class presents their original song and the audience is always involved in some way. Victor has witnessed time and again that engaging the audience in the singing process is very meaningful to the students. Their song becomes very real when other people are singing it. It becomes a public event and a part of the larger society.

For instance, in the song, "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" the audience joins in on the refrain, with male voices singing "Wolf, wolf" and female voices singing, "Don't cry wolf." The melody the class created for this song was an original tune, having a very blues-like sound very close to Rockin' Robin.

The Boy Who Cried Wolf by Ms. Knapp's Class

Once there was a boy who loved to tell tales.
He told about riding on the back of blue whales
One day in the forest taking care of his sheep
His imagination took a very large leap.

REFRAIN

Wolf, wolf, don't cry wolf
Wolf, wolf, don't cry wolf
Wolf, wolf, don't cry wolf
Don't cry wolf

"Wolf!" cried the boy, so the villagers scurried.
They ran to the boy because they were worried.
They knew the wolf was quite a fierce beast.
And that he could have a mighty delicious feast.

REFRAIN

When the villagers got there, no wolf was around
The boy cried again, still no wolf was found.
The villagers were tired and sick of his crying.
When he cried again, he learned his lesson on lying.

"The Hare Who Had Many Friends" was a song created by Mr. Lessard's class. The class decided to use "Old MacDonald" as the tune, which worked quite well with the lyrics. In the performance, the audience sings the chorus. (You might want to try to sing it yourself! Remember, you might need to adjust the phrasing just a bit.)

There was a hare chased by a fox, up to Crow's tree.
Hare called up to the crow saying, "Will you please help me?"
Crow said, "This tree is way too small for both of us to stay."
So Hare turned 'round and saw the fox, then she ran away.

CHORUS

A true friend here and a true friend there.
A true friend helps and a true friend cares.
Here a friend, there a friend, everywhere a true friend.
True friends help when you're in need,
They're true friends indeed!

Hare ran very fast straight to Goat's house, she asked him for some help.

"Please butt the fox with your big horns, I want to hear him yelp!"

Goat said, "I am too busy now." He wouldn't help the hare.

Then Hare heard Fox begin to growl, but Goat didn't really care.

CHORUS

Hare said to cow, "Please chase the fox. Chase Fox far away!"

Cow said, "I can't, I hurt my leg." So Hare went on her way.

With Fox behind she was alone. No one would help her hide.

She ran and ran from place to place 'til she was safe inside.

CHORUS

The moral of our story is "True friends are always there."

Hare learned her lesson the hard way. Her friends seemed not to care.

A true friend cares and helps others when they are in need.

Hare's trouble showed who were her friends. Her friends were few indeed.

At the end of the residency, Victor has a brief meeting with each teacher for a final check-in and to see if they feel comfortable implementing this songwriting technique on their own. In all cases, the teachers felt positive about the experience and felt, because of their own commitment and involvement with the process, they were eager to try it again. They were also quite excited about the ways their students were actively engaged with language and reading and writing. Not only were the students' interested in the classroom, but the songs went home and parents and siblings were involved.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, real learning took place through this artist residency with Victor Cockburn. The students, the teachers, families, and friends will undoubtedly never forget the fables and the songs that were created and performed in this school community. They are now a permanent part of their communal verbal and musical memory.

Soon after the completion of the residency, Victor received the following letter from Ms. Linda Loissele, Assistant Principal of the Chandler School. This letter testifies to the value the arts have in supporting specific learning goals and objectives. Ms. Loissele wrote,

Thanks, Victor, for helping us put together a program that was not only valuable educationally, but also a lot of fun. The excitement we all felt just before the program was huge! I would walk into or by classrooms of children who were singing their own songs with such enthusiasm and pride. Parents have thanked me and told me how much they enjoyed this kind of sharing. One parent told me her son was singing and dancing all the time in their kitchen, and another parent told me her son would sing the boys' part and she would sing the girls' part. It's wonderful that whole families got involved before and during the assembly. You couldn't see the toddlers who were dancing to the music during the performance. They were near me at the end of the risers, and they were having such a great time.

I think the idea of matching fables to songwriting is a natural for instruction in many of our curriculum skill areas, especially sequencing, main idea, supporting details, and comprehension. It can also be used as an alternate assessment tool for our students with different abilities. I have personally seen many students called learning disabled shine in this type of activity. It was also fantastic that all students could be included in the composing, rehearsing, and final product.

Connecting songwriting to a language arts unit on fables became a greater process than simply reading a fable and answering a few questions about the content. The stories were analyzed, summarized succinctly, and rhyming phrases were constructed. Descriptive words were explored and experimented with in order to make each line come alive. Essential ideas or themes were chosen for the chorus through observation, problem solving, and creative expression. And, as Victor says, "All this happened in the course of having a really good time. It's fun and the students are very engaged." Using the arts, in this case, specifically music, as a vehicle for learning, is a powerful resource for tapping into the imagination and creativity of every student, allowing them to personalize learning in a way that is meaningful and long-lasting

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Victor Cockburn, co-founder of Troubadour, Inc. is an Artist/Educator who has been presenting his literacy through song writing program in workshops and school assemblies for teachers and students throughout Massachusetts and New England for over twenty-eight years. You can contact Victor through Troubadour, Inc. via email at troubincvc@aol.com or Troubadour, 1256 Payson Rd., Chestnut Hill, MA 02467.

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