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Using African and African-American Folktales in a Genre Study

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Overview

Stories are equipment for living.

- Kenneth Burke

From their origins in oral traditions, stories have been the vehicles for transmitting culture, preserving memories and making sense of the world. From the lips of skillful storytellers to the attentive ears and open hearts of their listeners, these tales fostered a sense of identity, communicated values, and provided education and entertainment. In this unit I will examine storytelling through folktales, the stories that originated from the lives and experiences of people — the "folk." As these stories were told over and over from one generation to the next and traveled across countries and continents, they were treasured as cultural necessities and, therefore, equipment for living.

On one hand the vitality of the folktales resides within their social and geographic context. By understanding the land and language, people and places, customs and changes associated with them, we can appreciate their origins and later distributions over time and place. For these reasons, we will study the background of the folktales to gain cultural information and insights. On the other hand, folktales evolve. They are not static. Their fluid nature is their key to survival. Different listeners can be attracted to the same story for different reasons. Whether explaining phenomena, relating news, enforcing laws or instructing children, these stories are told entertainingly. To explore their entertainment value, we will examine different types of folktales, the relationship between storyteller and listener, and the use of today's technology to preserve and promote storytelling.

I intend to use this unit of study during the month of February as part of our school's celebration of Black History Month. The unit will be a partnership of language arts and technology. This four-week curriculum is designed for primary students in grades 1-3 but can certainly be fleshed out for upper elementary students in fourth and fifth grades. The class consists of 30 inner-city students in a multi-age classroom. They have experience using the computer and most of the applications mentioned in this unit.

The reading and studying of African and African-American folktales will help students make connections to their cultural heritage. They will gain an appreciation of the rich traditions that Africans carried to America

during their time of slavery, their efforts to manage relationships in their new environment, and their ability to find humor amid struggles and sorrow.

Rationale

Storytelling leads children to books, and reading and listening to folktales will lay the foundation for studying elements of literature in a variety of genres. In "Helping Children Understand Literary Genres," Carl Smith argues that folktales make an excellent and effective starting point for children because they are a clear and uncomplicated form of literature.¹ By reading and analyzing several sample folktales, young children can quickly develop a schema for this literary genre and later apply these thinking skills to other literary engagements.

Folktales appeal to children. The introduction is uncomplicated, the plot is action-packed and the conclusion is satisfying. While enjoying the humor, the rhythm and the repetition of these stories, children can relate to the struggles and antics of everyday life. Folktales invite children to journey to other places and join hands with heroes and heroines who inspire them to be creative, confident and courageous. When good triumphs over evil, their world is safe, secure and satisfying.

To learn how a community's culture is expressed in part through its stories, students will respond to selected folktales. They will come to terms with *values* by questioning what the characters learned in the story, and if and how it applies to their lives. They will evaluate why it was important to keep retelling the story. They will develop a sense of *culture* by identifying the country and language of origin, considering what experiences would lead to a story like this. They will also determine whether the story reveals information about the community's games, celebrations, heroes and treatment of old/young people. They will look into what the *relationships* in the story reveal by asking how problems were solved, who contributed to the solution, and if this strategy can be useful to us. They will determine whether the *time* and *place* of the story give information about location and landscape while also deciding what part of the story transcends time and place.²

As Jane Yolen points out in *Favorite Folktales From Around the World*, stories are powerful, fostering compassion and humanness. They are both history and mystery. As they carry the joys and sorrows, bruises and embraces of the societies in which they dwell, they give us clues to open the doors to our self.³

As the term itself suggests, folktales are tales told by common people, not "litterateurs." They are originally spoken stories, not written ones. Today we may read folktales because they are collected in books, but their language still remains folksy, conversational, and often enhanced with regional dialect.⁴

Modern technologies continue to extend the way folktales are told and retold, and these same technologies also offer new opportunities to collect, organize, and share information about the origins and diffusion of folktales.

Technology and Literacy

In today's classrooms, technology is the bridge between instruction and production. Technology fosters creative and critical thinking for students and provides tools that support their learning across the curriculum. With the right tool for the right task, technology helps students reinforce essential learning skills. In this unit I plan for students to use Internet resources to research and read and/or listen to specific folktales, to use technology to record their retellings of a tale for other classrooms, and to publish a podcast as a culminating project.

Multimedia projects are an engaging way for students to express their knowledge in any subject area. Software applications are now easy to use, providing students with powerful features. Students master basic skills, such as researching, reading, writing, speaking and listening. Digital media enhance ownership, support collaboration and problem solving, and widen the audience for student work. The use of technology brings us full circle in coming to terms with purpose. Just as folktales were entertaining stories with lessons to be learned, technology can be used to entertain as learning is engaged.

In our school we use the Macintosh computers that are equipped with the iLife suite, enabling students to incorporate sights and sounds into projects. Since we are focusing on the oral tradition of storytelling, I intend to make use of the GarageBand and iTunes applications to bring the excitement of digital music and other audio content to enhance students' projects on folktales. With GarageBand students can create, perform, and record original music for recording a podcast. This adds a new and exciting dimension to learning.

Background Information

Folktales should be understood as one of the many forms of folklore. However, folklore is easier to experience than define. In general terms, folklore stands for the oral transmission of cultural materials. The word *folklore* was coined in 1846 by the English antiquary William John Thomas to replace "popular antiquities," the phrase commonly used to describe folk traditions. His recommendation found fertile ground and within a year *folklore* became a household word in England.⁵

Although some might be tempted to dismiss folklore as old-fashioned or uneducated, folklore is a central part of life in the present, connecting us to the past and guiding us to the future. On its website, *The American Folklore Society* lists several definitions and descriptions of folklore that communicate the range of materials that come under this heading. I choose this one for its breadth and depth:

Folklore is traditional. Its center holds. Changes are slow and steady. Folklore is variable. The tradition remains wholly within the control of its practitioners. It is theirs to remember, change, or forget. Answering the needs of the collective for continuity and of the individual for active participation, folklore...is that which is at once traditional and variable. (Henry Glassie. *The Spirit of Folk Art*. New York: Abrams, 1989)⁶

Folklore includes the related literary genres of myth, fairy tales, folktales, tall tales, fables, and legends. The boundaries between them are fluid and oftentimes folklore narratives are mixed genres. In his book *Folk and Fairy Tales*, D. L. Ashliman points out that scholars of folk narratives divide their stories into three main categories or genres: myths, legends, and folktales with possible subdivisions under each group. He offers explanations for each type.⁷

In my first lesson of the unit, I will have students explore the everyday folklore they experience in schoolyard games. We will make connections to the role of oral tradition in passing down customs from one group of people to another, such as holiday traditions, food preparation, sayings and stories. I will use the following definitions and explanations in my introductory PowerPoint presentation and invite students to think of examples as we progress.

Myths

Myths are sacred stories set in the remote past that establishes a context for humans within the cosmos. They deal with the great issues of life. They define our relationship with supernatural powers as they tell the

beginnings of things or how things came into being. The characters in myths, humans, supernatural beings and animals, are believed to be real. The issues of myths are also those of religion: origin and purpose, good and evil, life and death. Because they express beliefs, myths are often told during sacred occasions and ceremonies. Prometheus and Pandora are examples of myth.

Legends

Legends, like myths, are explanatory stories presented as truth. However, they are human-centered and set in places that are recognizable. Legends may be wholly imaginary or relate accounts of historical people. They are typically told in everyday language. King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table is an example of legend.

Fables

Fables are stories known for their brevity and didactic nature. Told in prose or verse, they convey a moral truth. The characters of a fable are usually animals playing humanlike roles while retaining their animal traits. Aesop's Fables are the most famous in this category.

Folktales

Whereas myths and legends were considered to be true by their originators and tellers, folktales are, for the most part, fictitious. They are less profound and less authoritative than myths, but they, too, offer answers to life's questions and provide a venue for talking about issues of concern.

Fairytales

Folktales and fairytales are usually treated as two different kinds of narrative prose. However, folklore specialists consider fairytales to be a subcategory of folktales and prefer to call them magic tales. These tales contain a consistent schema of separation, initiation and return. Fairy tale characters give their readers access to a parallel world where magic is natural and expected. They are timeless tales representing the viewpoint of only one leading character. Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm brothers are the names most associated with fairy tales. The tales of Hans Christian Andersen's are mostly pure invention while the Grimm brothers used material from other sources.⁸

Students would find it interesting to look for the structure of separation, initiation and return in familiar fairytales. They can certainly recall how Hansel and Gretel were left in the woods to fend for themselves. The initiation stage in many fairy tales is full of conflict and, interestingly, holds different paths for male and female characters. The heroines endure overwhelming domestic tasks like Cinderella or passive captivity like Rapunzel. On the other hand, heroes are required to exhibit strength and valor in responding to daunting challenges during the initiation stage. Upon return to a new community, the heroes and heroines assume a position of power. Students will be encouraged to look for occurrences of these elements in the folktales we read.

Tall Tales

Tall tales are narratives that mix fantasy and exaggeration with fact. The hero or heroine is a larger-than-life character with a specific task to accomplish. Characters use everyday language and may be actual people or a composite of people. They are always bigger or stronger than real people even when the character is based on a real person. *John Henry* and *Pecos Bill* are examples of tall tales.

Approaches to Studying Folktales

The elements and structure of folktales appear in cultures throughout the world. The recognition of these similarities by scholars brought forth attempts to organize comparative folktale research and to trace tales back to their most likely beginnings. It will not be relevant to the teaching of young children to make all of these distinctions clear, but I do want them to understand that there is more than one kind of story, and where appropriate I will point out differences among types, drawing for these purposes on the distinctions I am making here.

Classification by Type

In 1928 American folklorist Stith Thompson expanded the pioneering work of a Finnish scholar Antti Aarne, and published *The Types of the Folktale*. Using numbers 1 through 2,499, the Aarne-Thompson index defines traditional plots and assigns a type number to each. The type is categorized as a traditional tale that has an independent existence. It does not depend on any other tale for its meaning. These are referred to as A-T types and provide great assistance to scholars in their investigations of folktales.⁹

Animal Tales are the first category of the A-T classification containing 299 types. In these non-mythical stories, wild or domestic animals speak, reason, and behave like humans. The animal characters usually correspond to stereotypes, such as a clever fox, an industrious ant, a faithful dog, and a stupid bear. Humor usually accompanies the deception and the absurd predicaments that result from stupidity.¹⁰

Ordinary Tales are the second category of the A-T classification and contain types 300-1199. The name "ordinary" is misleading. These include but are not limited to magic (fairy), supernatural, superhuman, religious, and romantic tales. Their main features are formularized language, supernatural motifs and sympathy for the underdog. Although the plots of these tales may contain royal characters and magical transportation, the language remains folksy.

Jokes and Anecdotes are the third and final category of the A-T classifications and contain types 1200-2499. These include numskull, formula tales, tales of lying, and stories about girls, boys and married couples. This section contains humorous stories characterized by short and simple plots in realistic settings.

In this unit we will deal mostly with animal tales. However, according to the A-T classifications, many animal tales are considered fables. Consequently we will discuss this in the introductory lesson when students are sorting types of folklore. The trickster tales according to A-T classification belong to the Joke and Anecdotes category. This will provide a good example of overlapping genres in folklore.

Classification by Motif and Function

Besides the classification of type, Stith Thompson has also described, categorized and numbered about 40,000 motifs in folk literature. A motif is the smallest element of a story that persists in the oral tradition because of its unusual or striking power. Most motifs fall into three classes: Actors (gods, unusual animals, or marvelous creatures), items in the background of the action (magic objects, unusual customs, strange beliefs), and single incidents (a ballroom in a palace, a journey, tricking an opponent).¹¹

Another important contribution comes from Vladimir Propp, a renowned Russian folklorist. In his *Morphology of the Folktale*, published in Russia in 1928 and first translated in 1958, Propp provided an analytical tool for examining folktales. Rather than focusing on that which differentiates one tale from another, he concentrates

on the similarities of story structure and story grammar. He theorized that folktales follow a specific formula, with as many as thirty-one narrative functions, used in each story occurring in sequence. Functions are stable elements (plots) in the story that never change. According to Propp, a tale may skip functions but it cannot change their order. By comparing the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole, he concludes that, ultimately all folktales tell the same story. ¹²

Since folktales are short pieces of literature, the students will gain experience in recognizing motifs and elements. Students will be guided to identify several of the thirty-one elements, such as departure, guidance, struggle, victory, return, and recognition. In the tales we read they will also look for such motifs as trickery, consequences of greed, journey, helper characters, foolishness, repetitive tasks, and importance of threes. In recognizing these motifs and story elements, students can apply them to other types of literature, movies, and video games.

Theories and Approaches

The Monogenesis (single origin) Theory claims that all folktales were descended from the myths of Indo-Europeans or Aryans. The Polygenesis (many origins) Theory argues that people everywhere have the same experiences and develop the same stories.

In the field of psychology, Freud believed that folktales came from unconscious needs and frustrations that best expressed themselves through a person's dreams. Symbolic images that disguise painful material make the dream more acceptable even to the sleeping person. On the other hand, Jung proposed that folktales grew from our "collective unconscious" experiences that were embedded in the psyche of all humans. The stories that grew out of those experiences are found among all people. In understanding folktales with the psychological approach, the interpreter can analyze the psychology behind the storyteller's creative process, including the recollection of old tales, or analyze the motivation of the characters in the story.¹³

The sociological interest in folktales is twofold. First there is the sociology "of" storytelling itself: the gathering of an audience for the purpose of hearing stories, the process of collecting stories for publication, and decisions to make changes in the stories.

Secondly, there is the sociology "in" folktales, focused when we use these texts for studying social relationships. Although the folktales feature individual characters rather than groups of people, social organizations are implied in the background. Religion also permeates folktales in which storytellers are quick to ridicule unworthy priests and target hypocrisy.¹⁴

The anthropological approach claims that folktales were remnants of ancient narratives that explained and accompanied fertility rites, and were used as moral lessons that society wanted its people to learn. The aesthetic approach is interested in the story's impact on today's audience. What makes the folktales pleasing? Scholars study the rhythmical language, vivid images, and observations of human behavior. For them our emotional involvement with the characters in the story becomes more important than the origins, diffusions, and classifications of the tales. ¹⁵

Each of the above theories holds a piece of the truth. No one theory has been proven to be wholly valid for all cases. Although students will not have to deal with the terminology of the above approaches, they will learn that folktales exist all over the world and were carried from place to place as groups of people moved and settled in other areas. As they read and interpret the folktales, students will decide what lesson or moral is being taught and how the characters in the stories help us learn something about our behaviors and emotions.

Folktales for Curriculum Unit

African Folktales

Stories from Africa were traditionally passed down by word of mouth. Usually the stories taught a lesson, and frequently a person learned the lesson the hard way. Many African folktales depict the antics of a trickster figure endowed with human qualities, whose mischievous ways are to be laughed at and learned from. The trickster figure in many "Asante" tales from Ghana is Ananse, the spider. Storytellers treat these characters as familiar family or friends and their names change one moment to the next. For example, the trickster, Spider, may be called Anansi, Nancy, Aunt Nancy, and Buh Nancy. Interestingly, word play brings the name close to "nasty" and "nonsense," which can both be used to describe the trickster's behavior.¹⁶

These stories hold a place of honor, but not merely because they present "strategies for survival." More importantly, they present the world as a contest between strength and wit. They remind us all to be on guard for the tricksters in our midst. They also beckon us to admire those who outwit the oppressor. The message of the trickster's tale resonates with the African belief that life is celebrated more fully through the dramatizing of opposites. Vitality and inventiveness are values passed on through African storytelling.¹⁷

African-American Folktales

The slaves brought their ancient storytelling habits to their new environment. The telling of tales not only helped them to pass their time or entertain the master's children, the stories they told served to communicate via symbols their experiences, hopes, and fears. Although the masters tried to rid the slaves of their tribal language and customs, they accepted story telling, especially animal tales, as harmless. Consequently, the African jackal survived as the American fox, the African hare as the American rabbit, and the African tortoise as the American turtle. The spider, Ananse, reached the West Indies. The American wolf replaced the hyena, the African villain. Lions, leopards, tigers, and monkeys retained their identity.¹⁸

The Uncle Remus tales, originally written down by Joel Chandler Harris, provide an important collection of African-American folklore. However, they are criticized for Harris's use of an exaggerated thick dialect and the perpetuation of racial stereotypes through the fictitious character of Uncle Remus, a contented slave eager to serve and entertain white people. The difficult-to-read dialect challenges readers of all ages and the stereotypes and racial issues taint the tales. Nevertheless, the stories, beyond Harris's intention and presentation, are a vital source of African-American folktales and culture.

Julius Lester, in his retelling of these folktales, makes these wonderful stories available in language and imagery acceptable today. Julius Lester eliminated Harris's fictional character, Uncle Remus, and changed the difficult-to-read dialect to accessible language for the contemporary reader. Lester's work is an outstanding contribution to children's literature that exemplifies his reverence for the past and respect for the folk tradition in particular.¹⁹

John Henry

Although the story of John Henry is usually read as a tall tale, it is partly based on historical circumstance. Some claim John Henry's origins were in West Virginia, while more recent research suggests Alabama. Still, researchers believe that John Henry was born a slave in the 1840's or 1850's. According to the legend he grew to stand 6 feet tall, 200 pounds - a giant in that day.

In order to construct the railroads, companies hired thousands of men to cut through obstacles that stood in the way of the proposed tracks. One such task was the blasting of the Big Bend Tunnel — more than a mile straight through a mountain in West Virginia.

Men like John Henry used large hammers and stakes to pound holes into the rock for explosives that would blast a hole deeper and deeper into the mountain. Some tunnel engineers started using steam drills to power their way into the rock. John Henry challenged the steam drill to a contest. He won, but died of exhaustion, his life cut short by his own superhuman effort.²⁰

During our celebration of Black History Month, the story of John Henry will help students make connection to their rich cultural heritage. Students can compare John Henry to other folk heroes, even those that are small in stature.

Objectives

The main objective for this unit is to study folktales as a literary genre facilitated by the tools of technology. In discovering the characteristics and patterns in folktales, students will acquire a schema for reading and responding to literature as well as engaging other forms of story in multimedia texts. Students will be introduced to the main categories of folklore: myths, legends, and folktales (fairy tales and tall tales). They will learn specific traits as well as overlapping elements. The students will use African and African-American folktales to explore the oral tradition of storytelling in African culture. They will discern the uniqueness and universality of folktales by looking at three types: animal, trickster and pourquoi tales. Students will use the tall tale, John Henry, to initiate discussion of heroes in their heritage. They will learn how folk literature reveals aspects of history, geography and cultural values. Students will use the tools of technology to research background of specific tales, to record retellings of tales, and to prepare a podcast for publishing their work.

Standards

Storytelling is an engaging way to transmit information. From one generation to the next, people have been passing on knowledge through the speaking/listening process of storytelling. In the classroom, the language arts curriculum is the appropriate starting place for the art of storytelling. However, other subject areas, such as social studies can also benefit when narrative is introduced.

This unit will help students fulfill the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening; Science and Technology; and Social Studies. They will be listed in the appendix.

Strategies

I will be implementing this unit in our primary Montessori classroom. The students in this class are in grades 1 through 3 and remain with the same teacher for three years. They are experienced at working independently as well as collaboratively. Project-based learning is very much a part of their curriculum. Classroom activities

will include whole-group, small group, and independent work. The class will have computer access in the classroom and in the computer lab.

A strategy I will use during this unit is participation in the 100 Book Challenge program.²¹ Each morning students begin their day with thirty minutes of independent reading. Baskets of books are organized by reading levels and/or genres. The teacher conferences with individual students and older students serve as coaches to help and encourage younger students. Using the motto, "The right books, at the right place, at the right time," the program motivates students by providing a large number of exciting books. With quality time in class and book bags to take home, the goal of reading 100 hours during the school year is achievable. Additionally, students are recognized with a medal each time they reach goals of reading 100 books, or for the older students 100 sessions of agreed upon chunks of time. For the duration of this unit, students will have baskets of books in the genres associated with folktales. They will make their own choices for independent reading and build up a schema for later discussion and interpretation. To supplement this classroom activity, I will bookmark websites that contain folktales for students' reading and listening.

To familiarize students with animal, trickster and pourquoi tales, we will look at the collections of Virginia Hamilton, Julius Lester and Nelson Mandela. These authors make wonderful stories available in language and imagery acceptable today. The older students will assist the younger students in researching information about types of tales, authors and geographic origins. Students will work in small groups to read and practice retelling one of the tales. The first graders will perform a readers' theater. The second graders will use the applications Kid Pix or Kidspiration to illustrate and record their folktale. The third graders will use PowerPoint to present their tale, incorporating audio and visual effects. In their presentations and performances, the students will be instructed to include characteristic elements of folktales: setting, characters, plot, theme, style and motif. I will prepare a guideline checklist to help guide them.

Throughout the unit I will ask students to be attentive to opening and closing sentences in the folktales. Beginning sentence have patterns such as, "Once upon a time..." "There once was..." "Listen to this story of ...", or "In the days when..." These openings establish the setting quickly and refer to a generalized place, such as a hut, forest or palace. The endings of the folktale usually gives listeners a cue to let them know the story is over, ease the transition to normal conversation, or set the stage for the next story. The ego of the storyteller might also be revealed in the ending. A few examples are: "Now, that's my tale." "A mouse did run: my story now is done," "I go around the bend, I see a fence to mend, on it is hung my story end," "And that is why, even today..." The list will be a resource for students' writing or retelling of a folktale. Students can collect these beginnings and endings in a story box, in the spirit of Ananse who acquired a box of stories from the Sky God. I will create a database for these sentences and assign a few students to maintain it. This can then later be printed out as a resource for writing stories.

In keeping with our celebration of Black History Month, we will read the tall tale, *John Henry*. Students usually select a character to showcase each week of the month. In the computer lab, they can research sites that herald the hero while presenting research on the fact and fiction aspects of the tale. Internet resources will be listed in Appendix.

For the culminating activity, the students will work on preparing a podcast to publish their work. Students will work on writing scripts to explain different aspects of the material presented in the unit. For example, the components might include: an explanation of a folktale, elements of folktales, types of folktales, a book review of a folktale, a commercial about food, music or clothing used in the story, a travel segment about the geographic locations of the tale, and an original or retelling of a favorite tale. Music composed on the

application GarageBand will be used for transitions. One student will be selected to be the host connecting the various segments. The completed project will be uploaded to the School District of Philadelphia's server for access and downloading.

In a "Meet the Author" interview, Julius Lester tells students: "Sometimes I feel like there are all these spirits of blacks inside me, people who never had the opportunity to tell their stories, and they have chosen me to be their voice."²² Reading, writing and rewriting are his recommended tools for publishing. Students will be encouraged to heed his advice for publishing - in print as well as through the airwaves.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One: What is Folklore?

Objectives: Students will learn how folklore reveals cultural values. They will recognize stories as the most common form of folklore.

Duration: One period (45 minutes)

Procedure:

I will begin this lesson by discussing the terms *folk*, *folklore*, and *folktales*. I will use an anticipation strategy by asking students to read several phrases posted on chart paper, such as: The Thing about My Folks; Come and Meet My Folks; Folks Like Us; City Folks; and Country Folks. We will discuss the meaning of *folks* (people) and students will have an opportunity to add other common phrases and understandings to the list. Folks are a group of people who share a common factor. Some examples are: family members, classmates, church members, or ethnic groups.

To introduce the work *folklore*, I will ask students to think about games they play in schoolyard. We will discuss how they learned to play the game, who decided the rules, who taught them jumping rope rhymes, etc. After ascertaining that these activities were learned from parents, older siblings or classmates, we will talk about other forms of oral traditions found in family and community life, such as holiday traditions, songs sayings, and stories. We will then work toward a guiding statement. Folklore consists of the traditions and beliefs of a group of people that have been passed down orally from one generation to the next.

I will then use a PowerPoint presentation to distinguish between narrative folklore (stories, oral or written), customary folklore (family traditions) and material culture (objects). Students will interact with the presentation by sharing examples for each category. They will be encouraged to make connections for our celebration of Black History Month. I will add their contributions, and continue to do so throughout the unit, so that the original generic presentation will become a tribute to their African-American heritage, and later shared with a wider school audience.

We will then concentrate on narrative folklore as we look at examples and distinguishing characteristics of myth, legend and folktale. Students will work in small groups. Each group will have a basket of books that include myths, legends, and folktales. They will sort the books into their respective categories and each group will select a text to represent each type of narrative. As students work on this activity they will discover

specific traits as well as overlapping elements. They will use a checklist of characteristics for each type of folklore.

- Type of Folk Narrative: Myth, Legend or Folktale
- Title
- Characteristics: fiction or nonfiction, animal characters, superhuman beings, magic elements humor, setting, and purpose of story (explains why something happens, teaches a lesson, entertains)

Each child will then select a folktale to be read independently. They will use the checklist to respond to the tale.

Lesson Two: Folktales as a Genre

Objectives: Students will develop a schema for the folktale genre as they read and respond to African and African-American animal folktales.

Duration: Two periods (45 minutes each)

Procedure:

I will begin this lesson by explaining to the students the genre of folktales. We will then use their responses from the previous activity to create a poster listing the elements of folktales:

- Setting: Time introduced quickly, Place is generalized
- Plot: Swift, Action-packed, Conflict, Cumulative (use of 3's), Logical (even with magic)
- Characters: Few in number, Flat (one characteristic) Contrast (good/evil, clever/foolish)
- Problem: Strong character takes advantage of weaker character, Task or Quest
- Solution: Short and to the point, Good and clever wins over evil and foolish.
- Style: Use of rhyme and repetition, rich imagery
- Motifs: Place, Object, Action or Character

As we read/listen to folktales, we will use the chart to help us study the genre of folktales and decide how these elements are used or varied to tell a good story.

I will introduce the story, *The Name of the Tree*, as an example of an animal folktale.

This story retold by Celia Barker Lottridge is adapted from a Bantu Folktale called *The Bojabi Tree*. Due to a drought in the land, the animals haven't eaten for days. As they search for food, they come upon a tall tree with fruit on top. However, they cannot get the fruit down until they learn the name of the tree. One by one the animals try until the turtle finally succeeds by creating a verse to remember the name of the tree, "Bojabi."

Students will be divided into their age groups. The first graders will use the Readers Theater format to present the story. With copies of the text, students will select parts to retell the story. One student will narrate as the other children engage in the dialogue of the animal characters and action of the story. Retelling the story lends itself to the feeling of triumph within the journey motif.

The second grade students will use the software application Kid Pix to illustrate and retell the story. The story can be divided into six scenes. Working with a partner, students will use the templates, graphics or original

drawings to depict the scenes and record their oral retelling. Their pages will be printed out giving them an opportunity to compose a written text for their work.

The third grade students will examine a collection of African and African-American animal tales online and in the class library. They will then work in pairs to select a tale to retell by interviewing the protagonist or helper character. They will use the elements-of-folktale chart to help them compose their questions and conduct the interview. These scripts will be saved for the creation of the podcast in the closing lesson.

Lesson Three: Trickster Tales

Objectives: Students will recognize characteristics of a trickster folktale and identify types of animals that appear in popular trickster tales

Duration: Two periods (45 minutes each)

Procedure:

I will begin by reading the story, "The Hare's Revenge" from Nelson Mandela's *Favorite African Folktales* to the class. We will briefly discuss the story. What kind of story is this? Is it a folktale? How do you know? Do you know other trickster stories?

Which animal characters play the role of the trickster? We will make a list of the trickster animals that the students mention. The most common African ones are the tortoise, rabbit (or hare) and spider. As we read/listen to African and African American trickster tales, we will notice how tricksters behave in folktales. They break rules, boast and brag, and play tricks. They can be greedy and nasty as well as clever and wise.

Students will work in small groups to enjoy various trickster tales.

One group will read "Little Girl and Buh Rabby" from Virginia Hamilton's *Her Stories*. Students will discuss how Bruh Rabby outsmarts the wolf, but only after Little Girl and her helper's trick him. Students will also identify the false message and substitution motifs

Another group will read *A Story, A Story* by Gail Haley, a retelling of the African folktale that explains how all stories came to Earth. They will compare this to an earlier version, "How Spider Obtained the Sky God's Stories" from Jane Yolen's *Folktales from around the World*. (Available online-see Resources) In comparing the two versions, the students will notice the universality of the folktale with variations for audience's listening pleasure. They will use the application, Kidspiration, to create a spider map graphic organizer to depict characteristics of a trickster tale.

Another group will read *Clever Tortoise* by Francesca Martin. This is a traditional African tale from Nigeria in which the small clever Tortoise wins a tug of war with Elephant and Hippopotamus. In another story "Why the Hippopotamus Lives in the Water," the tortoise uses a clever trick to uncover Hippopotamus' secret name. In responding to the story, students will discuss the motif of size, the lessons learned, and the educational and/or entertainment value of the tale. I will guide them to recall the secret name motif used in our beginning tale, *The Name of the Tree*. They will then participate in a round-robin retelling of the tale. Students can improvise, invite audience participation and add dialogue. This shared activity will engage them in the tradition of African storytelling.

As a follow-up computer activity, students will have opportunity to learn more about Nigeria at the *World on*

Your Street website.²³ They can explore food, music, instruments, religion and fun facts. One segment tells about praise singers who are sprayed with money after flattering someone with a complimentary song. Another interactive website, *Abadjia Rhythm: Music of Ghana*, invites children to experiment with percussion instruments to create patterns with several percussion instruments and play back their song.²⁴ Each group will then compose a brief praise song for their trickster character and practice performing it with their composition of rhythmic background music. These praise songs can be used later for writing activities. Students will experience first hand how folk literature is generated.

Lesson Four: Publishing a Podcast

Objectives: Students will work collaboratively to design a podcast as they explore, synthesize and communicate their understandings of the folktale genre with examples from African and African American tales,

Duration: Four periods (45 minutes each with individual recording sessions)

Procedure:

To begin pulling our thoughts and work together, the students will brainstorm ideas. I will record and display their responses. We will categorize the ideas and sort them by content, curriculum connections, interest, and audience.²⁵ Students will have opportunity to listen to a sample educational podcast to give them a better idea of the task at hand.

For this work we will use a variety show format that allows for flexibility in planning segments and is exciting for younger students. We will decide on six segments. Students will work in groups to write scripts for each audio report and create catchy titles. Other students will work with GarageBand to find appropriate sound effects and themed music for background and transitions. Possible segments might include:

- A Word of Welcome
- Come and Meet the Folks
- Word of the Day
- Tips for Tricksters
- Animal Talk
- Book Review
- Celebrity Interviews
- Lessons Learned
- Fun Facts about Folktales

As the work evolves, we will use post-it notes on a timeline to order the segments and their time allotments. We will record each segment individually so that the speakers have less distraction and limited outside noise. An outline will facilitate the process of recording. For each segment we will rehearse and then record:

1. Introduction
2. Music
3. Welcome from host
4. Each segment
5. Transition music
6. Introduce segment and speaker

7. Content
8. Transition
9. Closing
10. Closing remarks from Host
11. Credits
12. Music

I will work with a few students to do final editing and preparation for publishing. Students will need a permission form from their parents. When the podcast is completed, it will be uploaded to the School District of Philadelphia's web server. Once that is complete, we will create posters inviting listeners and welcoming their feedback.

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