

CULTURAL ARTIFACTS, YOUTH AND DRAMA: A CREATIVE APPROACH TO BUILDING SELF-EFFICACY

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ABSTRACT

During my 2009-2010 Fulbright-Nehru fellowship in Chennai, I conducted a drama-based program in collaboration with the Sharma Center for Heritage Education. Participating students explored the mythological iconography of Mahabalipuram to increase interest in their cultural heritage. I later conducted an analogous approach at home in Hawai'i, where many students are geographically removed from their cultural home. My goal was to help students better understand how culture, community and their own experiences contribute to their learning.

Keywords: cultural literacy • folklore • self-efficacy • English learners



INSPIRATION FROM MY 2009-2010 FULBRIGHT-NEHRU EXPERIENCE

One tenet of a Fulbright fellowship is how the experience influences work in your home institution. In 2005, I traveled to Chennai, India to volunteer for the Sharma Center for Heritage Education, an organization that conducts culture and community-focused programs in local schools. I worked with two small groups of children to devise short vignettes around local folklore and the issue of contaminated water resources. We presented these scenes to appreciative parents and community audiences. The director of the Sharma Center, who was enthusiastic with the work, suggested that I use this creative approach to help students make stronger connections with their cultural past. This led to my successful application for a Fulbright-Nehru fellowship.

In 2010, I returned to Chennai for six months to collaborate with the Sharma Center in two schools, one in urban Chennai and the other in a rural setting outside of the city. I guided 5th, 6th, and 7th standard students in exploring the mythological iconography of Mahabalipuram through drama to increase their interest in and involvement with artifacts of their cultural heritage. Mahabalipuram, located along the coast of southeastern Tamil Nadu, is home to a group of monuments that consist of rock-cut cave temples, monolithic temples, bas-relief sculptures, and structural temples as well as the excavated remains of temples. According to the Sharma Center Director, many of the students had little knowledge of or had never even visited the historical site, despite living so close.

After a visit to Mahabalipuram to closely examine the rock carvings, the students devised original stories inspired by the iconography. After performing their stories for their families and peers, the students read and listened to the historical myths that inspired the carvings. Teachers noted that after the experience the students began to closely investigate and share stories related to those at the monument, and expressed a desire to revisit the site with their families.

This experience inspired me to consider how I might apply an analogous approach to work through my home institution in Hawai'i, a place where many students are living apart from their cultural home. One specific group I was most interested in working with was elementary-aged students in English Learner (EL) programs.

IDENTIFYING A NEED BACK HOME

I conduct arts-centered residencies in local schools as the Honolulu Theatre for Youth (HTY) Director of Education. Many of the schools include quite ethnically diverse student populations, with EL programs that contain a high percentage of Pacific Island and Asian ethnicities, many of whom are first-generation immigrants. In Hawai'i, specific grade levels ostensibly receive lessons about the islands' history as well as that of the greater Pacific region. However, there tends to be little recognition of some students' home cultures, even those who constitute a significant portion of a school or class. In his writing, Django Paris laments that school curriculum and lessons often fail to include the literacies of some students, specifically students of color, leaving them under-represented and negatively affecting their sense of worth.

APPLYING A PARALLEL APPROACH THROUGH MY HOME INSTITUTION

As I carried my Fulbright-Nehru experiences home, I set myself three tasks to help achieve one over-arching goal. The tasks included: engagement of students through creativity-focused experiences, placing cultural artifacts connected to the participating students' own ethnicity at the center of the learning, and democratizing the sessions by providing students opportunities to help shape the learning experiences. Engaging in these tasks would give students control over their learning with the over-arching goal of building their self-efficacy. An extension of Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive theory, self-efficacy is belief in one's capability to organize and execute one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment in order to achieve self-relevant goals.

BUILDING CREATIVE AND COLLABORATIVE SKILLS TO VALUE CONTRIBUTION

The creative learning journey with the students begins with drama-based activities and games that encourage an atmosphere of positive and joyful partnership and helps build a foundation for supportive collaboration. The attendant skills help students to not only gain greater control over their own success, but also prepare them for cooperatively dramatizing stories from their own and their classmates' cultures. Collaborative activities encourage students to cultivate empathetic attitude towards all, learning to value the skills that differing partners bring while also enhancing their communicative abilities. In a small study conducted by Steele and Kelin, group members developed ways to challenge and support each other, learning early in the process that when their collaboration broke down, they would accomplish very little while the groups around them steadily progressed. In those moments, the groups needed to problem-solve, suggest ways to overcome their difficulties and make everyone in their group feel successful and included. One student, who proved to be an effective leader, said, "I'm letting everybody share their ideas and we're using their ideas... Trying to make our group balanced, and just do the best we can." By collaborating on their creative choices, groups gained communal ownership over their process and creative products.

As students develop the concept of comfort as a creative collective, we begin the process of dramatizing cultural folk tales. I present a list of tales from various cultures representative of the participating students that includes title, island/nation of origin and a tiny summary. 'The Demon and the Taro. Marshall Islands. A demon tries to trick children using magical taro.' In any given creative learning session, students jointly decide which story they desire to explore in that session, offering them opportunities to have greater control over the process, from planning to assessing and revising their creative work. This raises students' responsibility as well as their investment. Students move from passive listeners to active leaders and collaborators. Students not only have power of their work, but discover the breath of their own creative capabilities.

To be inclusive of all students, we explore various forms of decision-making to embrace different norms and individual comfort levels, ensure that no one voice dominates over time, and foster the understanding that listening, compromising, and making strong contributions together offer them tangible power over how we proceed. We work from the premise that we will eventually play with every story on the list.

Once we select a text, students artistically interact with the story through a series of scaffolded drama strategies. Before reading a selected text, students individually and collectively dramatize short sequences reflective of the tale's central themes ("transformation"), character action ("She conjured magic."), and key vocabulary (with a focus on non-English words). As they draw on personal experience and knowledge related to the story, characters,

and themes to generate their artistic interpretations, students more readily visualize the text and develop ownership over their work. As we begin reading the text, we occasionally pause for the students to create, revise, and expand on key story events. At certain times, if they desire, student volunteers will read aloud short passages. With at least one text, I cut a printed version into small pieces. Groups then piece the text back together as they presume it might read. When we read the text aloud, students listen more closely, curious as to how close they came to the actual order.

As students build the comfort to take greater risks with their artistic creations, I give them more complex tasks. It might be pantomimed encounters between characters or collaborative actions that demonstrate story problems or conflicts. Student partnerships might play with vocalizing a piece of narrative text or improvise a few lines of dialogue that accompany character action they created or they may devise short vignettes and scenes. Eventually, groups share their work with each other, offering supportive comments about each other's creative choices, which encourages greater risks and richer creative work. Each exploration concludes with a reflective conversation about the story to help students consider what makes a narrative engaging and what aspects of the story mirror their own lives.

HIGHLIGHTING MORALES IN CREATED STORIES

One core question we consider helps us all wonder why a story is necessary: What did people who created this story want us to think about? What values are being expressed through the story? How does this story help us learn about life, culture, and ourselves? I endeavor to be open to students' suggestions, helping them to realize that one story can mean different things to different people. And I seek opportunities for them to make connections between stories to discover strong similarities between tales from various places, just as we find similarities among ourselves. Alim, Paris and Wong ask readers to consider educational experiences that avoid expecting students of color to conform to white, middle-class norms, and instead focus on, honor and even analyze those same students' cultural practices and investments, raising their profile and purpose within the classroom.

AT THE CORE IS SELF-EFFICACY

After creatively playing with as many tales as our project schedule allows, students 'write' their own stories. To match how folk tales are shaped by many voices over time and reflective of place and community, the students come together to shape an original narrative. We list various character types and identify which we might like to feature in our story. We then create a story circle, spontaneously piecing together a beginning, allowing ourselves to pause and proceed as desired, to discuss misperceptions or dead ends. Once we have the beginnings of a story idea, small groups each dramatize

different segments of our ever-expanding story. I encourage them to keep adding characters as necessary or desired and elaborate on the story events. As the groups build on the story, I encourage them to think about the tales we explored. What made each or any of those stories so engaging? How might they use what they discovered in the other tales? What might they include that would surprise and thrill the other groups?

We share the developing segments twice. After the first share, each group offers feedback to the others. Which ideas were engaging? What might each group add or expand? What might help them improve their work? We avoid any judgement. The students are there to strengthen their own sense of themselves and their capacity for success. After the second share, each group suggests an ending for the story. I find this one of the more enlightening aspects of this experience. Just as we previously discussed the multiple possible meanings or messages of the folk tales, we get the chance to experience how different groups might interpret our tale in various original ways.

A growing body of research supports the value of embedding cultural and communal artifacts, values, and norms in children's daily learning. Education that reflects lived experiences gives greater meaning and purpose to the learning and, possibly most importantly, encourages pride in who they are and what they can accomplish when given the opportunity to be agents of their own learning.

MY PERSONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Although I had previously conducted programs in other countries, including the short stint in India referenced in the opening paragraph, this first Fulbright-Nehru fellowship in Chennai immersed me deeply in unfamiliar territory. Everything, from food to religion to cultural norms to even daily transportation choices, differed significantly from what I grew up with and my own daily norms back home. The experience encouraged me to not only rethink my daily routines but also put greater trust and faith in collaborating with students. My especially limited knowledge about Indian cultural norms and societal expectations encouraged me to let go of control and welcome what I could learn from the students even as I guided them. I embraced my personal expertise with drama while simultaneously reveling in gaining greater understanding about this new world around me through the students' life experiences and expertise, just as the students were building a deeper appreciation about their community and themselves. I have carried this personal learning into other creative experiences. In my more recent Fulbright-Nehru fellowship (2019-20) and Specialist project (2022), I have taught college-aged teaching artists to embrace a similar attitude towards in-school drama work through the National School of Drama (Theatre-in-Education Wing) in Tripura.

PERPETUATING THE LEARNING

The learning approach outlined here began with historical sites and cultural tales. Other possibilities include personal stories or experiences, local events of note, interviews with students' relatives or local people who experienced historical events. Public artworks, museum artifacts or curiosity about certain geographical or man-made features could inspire a learning journey. Connecting with local art work and historical sites can help students gain new perspectives about their community and its role in their own, their neighbors' and ancestors' lives. Encouraging students to find and share stories or anecdotes, from the past as well as from their own experiences, demonstrates respect for cultural values and norms while cultivating students' sense of self and their place in the world.

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At the core of this work is building collaborations and self-efficacy skills. Students learn more about each other through both the creative work as well as the stories themselves, directly experiencing the value of respect, support, and empathy. As they work together to explore, interpret, and make sense of the content material, they become more active, engaged, and curious learners that come to have a better understanding about how culture, community, and personal experience are all an essential part of learning, while gaining the capacity to be agents of their own learning process. My 2009-2010 Fulbright-Nehru fellowship in Chennai offered me the opportunity to lead, experiment with and learn from the Sharma Center students, expanding my repertoire of teaching approaches that ultimately well-served my work through my home institution in Hawai'i.

NOTES

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Courtesy, Daniel A Kelin, II

BIOGRAPHY

Daniel A. Kelin, II is the Director of Drama Education at the Honolulu Theatre for Youth in Honolulu, Hawai'i. He has received two Fulbright-Nehru fellowships (2009-2010, 2019-2020) to India and is currently on the roster of Fulbright Specialists, having completed a program in 2022 in Agartala, Tripura. He can be reached at Daniel.kelin@fulbrightmail.org. For more information and resources from Daniel's Fulbright-Nehru experiences, visit www.DanielAKelin.com
