

FEATURE

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EXPERIMENTS IN INTERACTIVE
STORYTELLING IN AN
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LIBRARY

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The scenario that I encountered when I began working in my present position was not unusual for an elementary school library: the students study a culture, and the librarian reads the stories of that culture to them to enrich the study and to make the culture come alive. My fourth-graders studied the Maya in the fall and the ancient Egyptians in the spring. In my first year in the job I did what had been done before: I read Mary-Joan Gerson's *The People of Corn* and Deborah Nourse Latimore's *The Winged Cat*. My students did research on assigned individual Egyptian gods without really knowing the stories about them. It was not a disaster, but it was unsatisfying, both for me and for them. I had to figure out some other way. Is it possible, I asked myself, to share mythology in a way that respects the culture, draws the kids in, and makes the stories both interesting and alive? The traditional answer is: find a good retelling of the myths and read them aloud. The fact that

the retellings can have difficult language, have incomplete stories, or take for granted prior knowledge of the context or background—all of these issues are easily pushed aside because what other choice does one have?


This is the story of how I, a school librarian who is only an average storyteller, lacking dramatic flair or the ability to do multiple voices and accents, turned this situation around and began telling the myths to my students in a way that encouraged participation and resulted in engagement and enjoyment for everyone.

Challenges of Teaching with Mythology

The word "myth," in the sense of a traditional story about creation, gods, and heroes, does not have the meaning of "a widely held but false belief or idea" that popular culture has given it. Myths, traditional

stories, are stories told about the origins of the world, about the place of human beings in the world. According to Karen Armstrong, myths "helped people to find their place in the world and their true orientation" (2005, 6). She goes on to say that the task of myths is not to tell objective facts about history, but to help give us "insight into the deeper meaning of life" (2005, 10).

Myths are sacred stories. Telling the sacred stories of a tradition that has been dead for a long time (Greek myths, for example) is relatively simple, but telling sacred stories that are still held as sacred today is a lot more complicated. We see the Greek myth of how Prometheus stole fire and brought it to human beings as symbolic, but we also understand that at some point in the distant past there were people who believed that this story was really true. For many of us the Greek myths lack even symbolic power and have become simply superhero adventure



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stories. Greek myths are retold, reworked, and made fun of, without any sense that these actions might be construed as disrespectful. Our culture seems to regard Greek myths as our own—that we can do with them what we will. The descendants of the creators of these myths long ago embraced another religious worldview: Christianity. When we talk about Greek myths, there is no one to insult or disrespect.

However, in the case of the Maya, a living culture exists within which these myths are still sacred today. Anthropologist Dennis Tedlock spent considerable time in Guatemala with Mayan daykeepers or *aj kij*, people in the community who are spiritual guides and who work with the Mayan calendar. In Tedlock's work, we see the daykeepers enacting the role of storytellers of Mayan myths. Clearly, for these daykeepers the old Mayan stories are sacred and real—not an artifact from the past, but part of a living tradition with a central role in the community. [Editor's note: Information about the resources mentioned here and throughout the article is provided at the end of the article.]

How can an outsider tell these stories of the Maya while giving them honor and respect? While the most deferential approach might be to find a well-regarded retelling and then read it aloud, I chose to adopt an alternative approach and hoped that I could make it both respectful and engaging.

The Popol Vuh of the Maya

The Story

The *Popol Vuh*, a book from the K'iche' ¹ Maya of the eastern Guatemalan highlands, survived the wholesale destruction of Mayan books by the Spanish invaders in

the sixteenth century. It seems to have been passed down orally until a K'iche' person (or people) who learned alphabetic writing from the Christian missionaries wrote down an alphabetic version of the *Popol Vuh*. It was then copied by a Christian monk, Francisco Jimenez, and translated into Spanish.

The *Popol Vuh* (meaning the Book of the Community) tells of the creation of the universe, the earth, human beings, and, ultimately, the K'iche' Mayan people. Creation takes place through conversation between two gods, Heart of Sky and Plumed Serpent. Their ultimate project is to create beings who will be conscious and able to communicate with the gods, beings who will worship them. The gods create animals, but they are unable to communicate intelligently. Next the gods try to make a person out of mud, but it falls apart. They then make creatures out of wood, but these, too, are a failure. Their fourth attempt, using corn to create humans, will be successful, but the story moves to a different concern before this. The earth is too dangerous for people and has to be made safer.

How this safety is achieved is the story of the Amazing Twins, two demigod boys who take on various opponents in a series of daring adventures. They battle first with Seven Macaw and his two sons (the Maker of Mountains and the Creator of Earthquakes) and then with the evil Lords of the Underworld, who are responsible for diseases and death. The twins eventually sacrifice themselves to make the earth safe enough so that human beings can be created and can live safely on the earth. It's an extraordinary story, and it has come down to us in wonderful and vibrant detail.

Doing Justice to the Story

The story of the four attempts at creating humans is the subject of Mary-Joan Gerson's well-told picture book *The People of Corn*. This was the story that had been read by my predecessor, and it was a good introduction. But it didn't capture my 21st-century students' imaginations, and it completely left out what I thought were the best parts of the story: the section about the Amazing Twins. I had Victor Montejo's wonderful retelling of the *Popol Vuh*, but the unfamiliarity of these stories, their strangeness, and the ways in which they were structured differently than most of the folktales my students were used to made me concerned that if I read directly from the book I would be constantly interrupting the story to explain or provide context. I decided that telling the story was the solution. Understanding that some might feel that I had no right to tell these stories because of their sacred nature and my position as an outsider, I pressed ahead anyhow, hoping and believing that I could, however imperfectly, bring something to the stories that would open the minds of my students and enhance their understanding.

I still had no idea how I was going to tell this story with my amateur storytelling skills. Back in the mid-1990s I had seen a small part of storyteller Diane Wolkstein's expert telling of the story. She brought to it her trademark intensity and amazing physical movement, so that watching her was more like watching a play than a story. The memory of it intimidated me because I knew that I couldn't do what she could.

The breakthrough happened when I was reading Dennis Tedlock's book *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. He wrote:

A Quiche story does not begin with a series of formal opening announcements that call a halt

¹ I have used the spellings that Victor Montejo uses in *Popol Vuh* (1999).

to the conversation. The story may include or refer back to bits of the previous conversation... The Quiche hearer does not remain silent, or merely affirm from time to time that he is listening. Rather, the listener may ask a question, or else echo the words of the story now and then. The Quiche story of the creation, like Genesis, tells of creation by words, but the words are a dialogue, not a monologue. (Tedlock 1983, 247–48)

Reading this text gave me the idea, as well as a sort of permission, to try something new: storytelling as conversation. I would learn the stories, tell them as best I could, provide explanation and context while telling them, and invite the students to ask questions and comment while I was telling the story.

I had only four class sessions, and I wanted to do the stories justice. I chose to read Gerson's *The People of Corn* first and then explain to students that the story I was going to tell took place in the middle of that story. I told the tale of the Amazing Twins, Junajpu (Hunter) and Ixb'alanke (Little Jaguar), but focused only on their struggle against the Lords of the Underworld. This section of the *Popol Vuh* begins with their father and uncle's fatal conflict with these evil lords, and that is where I began.

I used Montejo's 1999 retelling as my basis but quite often went back to Tedlock's 1996 translation of the *Popol Vuh* to try to get a clearer picture of the original. I wrote down my version, sticking as close to the original texts as I could while using words I might use in conversation. I tried to make the Amazing Twins seem like real people (notwithstanding the fact that they were demigods), encouraging students to imagine

how they might have felt going down into the Underworld. I kept in mind that when students were grossed out by some of the details (rivers of blood and pus come to mind), they could express that discomfort but without being disrespectful to the story. I would remind them that this was a story that was really important to real people, in much the same way that the Bible or Torah or Bhagavad Gita might be important to them and their families.

I used no pretense or playacting to create illusions of closeness or identity. The students were always aware that I, the storyteller, was an outsider, doing my best to share what I understood of the story and culture with them. This was an important aspect of approaching the stories with respect.

I decided to use the images by Luis Garay from Montejo's 1999 retelling to help the students visualize the characters in the story. These images are drawn in a realistic style familiar to the students, and I felt that they might help bridge the cultural gaps and humanize the characters. For this reason I decided against showing the students Mayan glyph images, which are challenging to interpret without some expertise and familiarity.²

The story has many potential hooks for students: the twins are near-orphans; they are smarter and better tricksters than their father and uncle; their connection with the natural world, especially with small creatures such as mosqui-

toes or ants, helps them to prevail; they refuse to give up; they show unswerving loyalty to each other even when things look extremely dire (Junajpu's head is severed from his body during the final ballgame contest with the Lords of the Underworld); and the more they accomplish, the more powerful they become.

As the sessions went on, the students and I became more comfortable with this model. I had to learn to move in and out of storytelling mode and pick up the threads where I had left off. The students had to learn to be patient if a fellow student had a question or wanted to share a connection or an insight. Students were able to bring information that they had picked up in class or from their research, additions that enriched the story. During the sessions students used many of the skills they use for reading: predicting, inferring, connecting, imagining. But, most exciting to me was their interest and engagement. Students who were often bored in class were stopping me in the hallway to ask for assurances that we would continue with the next installment in the next class. Of course, the more-violent and stranger aspects of the story made it exciting for students. But we managed not to lose sight of the fact that these twins were facing down the lords of the Underworld because of their loyalty to their father and uncle who had been killed by the lords, and that, ultimately, the twins engineered their own deaths to defeat the lords and make the world safe for humans.

2 If I had had access at the time to an interactive whiteboard and compatible software, I might have tried using some of the Mayan glyph images. Showing a large-scale image allows for detailed analysis and group discussion of its features. These activities, in turn, help to shift students' perceptions from an initial experience of strangeness or unfamiliarity to making connections with what they already know of the culture and story, and thus helps to enhance their understanding of the images.

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A Multitude of Gods: Ancient Egypt

The Story

Ancient Egyptian myths present a different set of challenges. As with the case of the Greek myths, the descendants of the creators of these myths have moved on to different religious beliefs and practices, mostly Islam and Coptic Christianity. There is no living cultural or religious community to be concerned about. But the mythology is extraordinarily complex, with hundreds of gods, many of whom change names, characters, and familial relationships depending on geography and historical eras.

The records are fragmentary and incomplete. The longest and most complex myth we have is the story of creation that comes from Heliopolis, now part of the suburbs of Cairo. This is the story of the creation of Ra/Re/Atum and the love story of Isis and Osiris, as well as the power

struggle between them and their son Horus on the one hand and their brother Set on the other. Many other stories survive, but none that approaches this one in terms of detail or human emotion. I decided that any reading or telling of Egyptian mythology would have to begin here. However, it couldn't end here. I discovered that the ancient Egyptian myths, being from a wide geographic area over thousands of years, were extremely varied. Other Egyptian creation myths told different stories with different gods, or the same gods in different relationships to each other.

The most coherent account of Egyptian mythical stories I could find was Jacqueline Morley's 1999 retelling in *Egyptian Myths*. But this book told only the story from Heliopolis, and in a way that suggested that this was the only extant version. Clearly, I could not use just this book. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to adopt a similar approach as I had for the

Popol Vuh: conversational storytelling, with input from the students.

Doing Justice to the Story

I began by trying to sort out the bewildering geography and the history of the myths. Slowly, I decided that I would take into account only geography, that is, I would tell the creation myths from different cities, without worrying about when they were told or how they changed over time. I would begin with the creation story from Heliopolis. This became the emotional heart of the unit. The story of what my students tended to call a "really messed-up family" drew students in. Not only did the tale include some of the bitterest and most violent sibling rivalry imaginable (including cutting the dead body of a brother into numerous pieces and scattering them far and wide), it also had some of the most committed and loving relationships: between Isis and Osiris and between Isis and her son Horus, as well as a wonderful

sisterly relationship between Isis and Nephthys.

I then gleaned what I could from some other creation stories from Memphis, Hermopolis, and Thebes. We were able to compare and contrast these different creation stories.

A year or two after I began telling these stories, the school library got an interactive whiteboard, and this acquisition transformed the way I told the stories. Using compatible software, I created family trees for the gods and collected images of the different gods and artifacts, putting them together to illustrate aspects of the stories. Students were being assigned pieces of the myths to read for homework, and their research was revealing all kinds of different relationships between the gods, much of it contradictory. We could note all these contradictions in the projected document, save it, and come back to it the next time.

We could create our own charts of relationships between the gods. Telling the stories became seamlessly intertwined with talking about the gods and what we knew about their characteristics. Telling the stories also became intertwined with conversations about the different ways in which the ancient Egyptians thought about reality and about the gods and discussions about how the Egyptians were the ultimate syncretists, making use of what already existed and endlessly adding to it and changing it.

Many other gods don't appear in any of these creation stories but have important roles in the Egyptian pantheon: Ma'at, the goddess of order and justice; Bes, the miniature god of good luck who scares away evil; and many others. Despite the fact that no surviving stories provide details about the activities of these gods, projecting large-scale images to discuss in close and critical detail helped to make

the gods concrete and interesting. Being able to store and retrieve any information the group wrote down about them supported deeper discussions than those possible in the past.

The Egyptian myths in particular can encourage a critical look at students' own creation myths, whatever the religious backgrounds of the students. Sometimes focusing on Egyptian myths prompts students to ask, "What was there before there was anything?" They can then bring their religious or scientific understandings to bear on this question. Or, they start to wonder about religious belief, its relation to science, and its relativity.

Beyond Egypt and the Maya

This approach to telling myths works beyond the two sets of myths discussed here. For example, for the past couple of years I have used this approach to tell Greek myths to

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fifth-graders. I've relied primarily on the amazing classic from Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire (Delacorte 1992) to focus on the Greek story of creation from the very beginning through to the triumph of the Olympians, and then shared a few of the Olympian stories, including the tale of Perseus and the Gorgon.

Expanding Horizons

Telling myths in this participatory way has been exciting and engaging. Each year that I've told the Egyptian myths I have refined my understanding a little more, sometimes prompted by one of my own questions and sometimes by a student's question I was unable to answer. I have modeled learning as a continual process, as my students have watched me grapple with various issues.

My students have been encouraged to reflect on the myths and stories around them and to think about the way we approach scientific explanations of the natural world as opposed to mythical, symbolic explanations. Students have gotten a glimpse of another culture, possibly an ancient culture, which has helped them to realize that through the ages people thought differently about themselves and the universe. Once one realizes

that people long ago thought differently from us, it is a short step to understanding that people today in different situations are likely to think differently as well. Although it does not allow for concrete experiences of a culture, the participatory nature of this kind of storytelling entails authentic reflection and the creation of meaning through discussion, argument, and the use of one's imagination.



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Monsters: Tales from Around the Globe” in the October 2014 issue of *School Library Journal*. She is a member of AASL and Association for Library Service to Children.

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- Armstrong, Karen. 2005. *A Short History of Myth*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- Tedlock, Dennis. 1983. *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- . 1997. *Breath on the Mirror: Mythic Voices and Visions of the Living Maya*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Suggested Resources for Storytelling

The Maya Story Sources

Gerson, Mary-Joan. 1995. *People of Corn: A Mayan Story*. Boston: Little, Brown.

This picture book version of the gods' four attempts to create humans is told well, provides a useful introduction for elementary students, and incorporates an appealing connection to the present-day Mayan people.

Montejo, Victor, reteller. 1999. *Popol Vuh: A Sacred Book of the Maya*. Translated by David Unger. Illustrated by Luis Garay. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre.

An indispensable resource, Montejo's retelling provided the basis for my retelling.

Tedlock, Dennis. 1996. *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*, rev. ed. New York: Simon and Schuster.

This translation gives a good feel for the story and also includes a very helpful introduction, as well as notes and a glossary. For the purpose of telling stories from the Mayan view of creation, it is best used in conjunction with Montejo's retelling.

The Maya Background Sources

Milbrath, Susan. 1999. *Star Gods of the Maya: Astronomy in Art, Folklore and Calendars*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Though this is a highly specialized work, the index can be used to glean a great deal of information about the characters of the *Popol Vuh* in relation to astronomy.

Read, Kay Almere, and Jason J. Gonzalez. 2000. *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

The authors provide helpful historical background and context for the *Popol Vuh*.

Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. 2012. "The Work of K'iche' Day Keepers." <www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGQZ3xLqOoQ> (accessed August 30, 2015).

This short video shows contemporary daykeepers explaining their role in the community.

Tedlock, Dennis. 1983. *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

The chapters "Beyond Logocentrism: Trace and Voice among the Quiche Maya" and "Creation and the *Popol Vuh*: A Hermeneutical Approach" are the most helpful in the context of storytelling in schools.

Tedlock, Dennis. 1997. *Breath on the Mirror: Mythic Voices and Visions of the Living Maya*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

In a mysterious and complex book Tedlock provides an understanding of contemporary daykeepers and their relationship to the myths.

Ancient Egypt Story Sources and Background Sources

Gros De Beler, Aude. 1999. *Egyptian Mythology*. [Great Britain]: Moliere.

Large, lush photographs of ancient Egyptian painting and sculpture make this an excellent source of images to examine with your students and pique their interest.

Ions, Veronica. 1983. *Egyptian Mythology*. (Library of the World's Myths and Legends series). New York: Peter Bedrick.

This very helpful resource is challenging, both because of its complex writing style and its detailed historical approach, which requires some background knowledge.

Lattimore, Deborah Nourse. 1992. *The Winged Cat: A Tale of Ancient Egypt*. New York: HarperCollins.

Circumstances force a young servant girl to visit the Netherworld. The story and detailed illustrations, plus an afterword on ancient Egyptian beliefs and customs, can pique students' interest in Egyptian mythology.

Morley, Jacqueline. 1999. *Egyptian Myths*. Illustrated by Giovanni Casselli. Lincolnwood, IL: Peter Bedrick.

The myth from Heliopolis in this book is well written and extremely useful as the framework for telling the story. With smooth language and clear descriptions, it lends itself easily to storytelling.

Nardo, Don. 2001. *Egyptian Mythology*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow.

In this unusual version of the Osiris story Nardo combines the stories of Hermopolis (with the Ogdoad), Heliopolis, Thebes, and Elephantine (with Khnum the ram-headed god). I chose to separate and extract these stories, and begin with Heliopolis.

Pinch, Geraldine. 2002. *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Pinch's explanation of the historical development and the geography of myths was indispensable during my research process. Also useful was her alphabetical listing of gods.

Watterson, Barbara. 1996. *Gods of Ancient Egypt*. Phoenix Mill: Sutton.

These complex accounts of the myths are highly technical and trace the origins of the deities to specific times and places.

Wilkinson, Richard H. 2003. *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Clearly written with high-quality photographs, this is a very helpful reference source.

Ancient Greece Story Source

D'Aulaire, Ingri, and Edgar Pari D'Aulaire. 1992. *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*. New York: Delacorte.

This is the definitive retelling of the Greek myths for young people. It is packed full of wonderful descriptions and clearly told stories.