Traveling the World with Folktales and Nonfiction

By Denise B. Geier

Even adults are not as familiar with geography as they could be. Television hosts have spotlighted that fact with questions to the man on the street that resulted in humorous responses. The recent television program Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader illustrated adults’ lack of knowledge of world geography. National Geographic Education Foundation’s Roper Report (2006) indicated that six in 10 Americans aged 18–24 could not locate Iraq on a world map, despite a war that has been covered nightly on the news since the first U.S. invasion in March 2003. Additionally, 75 percent could not locate Indonesia on a world map despite extensive television coverage of the December 2004 tsunami.

Stories are a great way to acquainted young learners with geographic locations. A plethora of choices is available in the folktale genre, so librarians and teachers will have little difficulty locating a variety. Folktales provide an accessible and child friendly approach for engaging students. In addition, when connections are made between stories, facts, and other meaningful classroom activities, retention is greater. Add a map and some support from nonfiction trade books, the Internet, and even the encyclopedia, and young students will be able to dazzle adults with their geography knowledge.

INTEGRATING THE CURRICULUM AND ADDRESSING THE STANDARDS

Since folktales are so versatile, teachers can integrate language arts with social studies while providing a conduit to foreign languages, technology, the arts, and even mathematics. Folktales also fulfill the need to address the National Committee of Social Studies standards regarding cultural and global connections. Folktales are stories that appeal to children as they often incorporate humorous elements, fairy tale qualities, and human and animal characteristics. Although folktales appear to be simple in style, they incorporate chants, interesting vocabulary, and other elements of storytelling.

THE FOLKTALES PROJECT: A MELDING OF FICTION AND NONFICTION

This project uses folktales as read-alouds. In this way, the oral tradition of the genre remains alive. Folktales have both conflict and action and immense readers into the plot, often within the first few sentences. They immediately capture attention. Combined with their universal themes such as good versus evil, love conquering all, and intelligence trumping strength, folktales appeal to youngsters.

Before commencing the project, purchasing a large world map and displaying it in the library or classroom is a necessity. It is best if the map is used for only one year, so locations can be marked on the map as folktales are presented and activities correlating to them are incorporated into it.

Plan a goal for the project to introduce one folktale per week. With a school year of approximately 40 weeks, students will learn the location and some facts about 40 countries and will have the benefit of being able to connect the information with a folktale. Following the reading of the folktale, learners will explore some facts and information about the country itself using trade books that focus on introducing countries and cultures. Integrating technology by visiting Web sites such as National Geographic and Google Earth can add much to make the lesson relevant and visually appealing.

It is imperative that teachers discuss the folktale genre with students prior to embarking on a unit or yearlong program that will focus on these stories. As part of the discussion, teachers should emphasize that folktales do not convey facts. This will help to ensure that students do not see them as representative of today’s culture in those countries.

CONNECTIONS

When possible, connecting the folktales to the arts and world languages provides opportunities to engage learners through the multiple intelligences. Asking students to illustrate stories or some aspect of the country’s facts, asking them to dramatize the folktale, or to present it using puppets will result in engaging all learners. Teachers may also find ways for families to share their cultures through the variety of folktales selected. Integrating music from folktales selected. Integrating music from folktale countries is another method of connecting to the multiple intelligences of the students in the classroom. Games always interest young children, so choosing a game to coordinate with the study of any country would be a good method for total classroom participation.

LANGUAGE ARTS

Presenting folktales as read-alouds is only one option. Using them as a reading theater activity provides another choice. Since Reader’s Theater activities build fluency, this activity can address multiple instructional goals. Teachers might also consider asking students to present a skit later in the week, based on the folktale introduced earlier. This option provides an opportunity for small group work, integrates writing, and serves as an outlet for creativity. This small group work can serve as a flexible group during guided reading periods or as a suggestion for what other students do while the teacher is working with a small group.

MATHEMATICS CONNECTIONS

At the start of the unit, the home location should be marked on the map with a star. Math might be integrated into the lesson by having students determine the number of miles between the home location and the folktale location. Depending on the grade level where the project is conducted, longitude and latitude of the folktale country also can become part of the lesson. Upper elementary students also could be engaged in writing questions that ask others to identify target countries based on more creative descriptions such as which country is x degrees below the equator or y degrees east of the international dateline. Additionally, bringing in the nonfiction pieces opens a venue for introducing learners to the currency of the country, converting dollars into that currency, and other such mathematical connections.

CREATIVE AND REAL WORLD CONNECTIONS

Teachers might consider the heritage of their students as they select the folktales and countries highlighted. This might open the door to engaging families to share customs, artifacts, clothing, or language with students. My own experience with this brought some Ecuadorian parents into a classroom to share some beautiful clothing, dolls, and pictures of their country. They were parents who might otherwise never have visited the school, so the project served more than one purpose.

Considering a pen pal project with one or more of the countries addressed throughout the year also would be enriching for students. With the ability to connect through the Internet, teachers are able to locate schools that may be interested in such a project.

COLLABORATION

This project is ideal for collaboration between librarian and classroom teachers, and can include
other specialists such as the art, music, and even the physical education teacher. As new folktales are explored, games can be played that are representative of the target culture. Technology teachers will find limitless ways to connect this project with hands-on exploration.

**ASSESSING LEARNING**

Periodically teachers can assess learning by distributing blank maps and asking students to locate folktale countries on the map. They might also ask students to write some facts about each of the countries, dramatize some aspect of the country, or write student-created stories that take place within a selected country. This project also opens the door for individual reporting about a country, an activity that could involve more in-depth research.

At the end of the year, students will be familiar with about 40 countries, their cultures, and at least one folktale from each country. They will leave your classroom as one of the four students who will be able to find Iraq on a world map and identify Indonesia!

**SOME SUGGESTED FOLKTALES TO GET YOU STARTED:**

**Amazon Region**


Providing a beautiful explanation of how the Amazon birds got their colors, this story can also provide a connection to learning about the rainforest's birds.

**Arctic**


An author's note providing information about the Inuit follows this beautiful story of how an old woman raised a polar bear cub.

**Bali**


Tolerance and the cycle of life are illustrated in this tale.

**China**


This unforgettable story about the 13 animals racing to be first in the calendar will make the Chinese zodiac come alive for students.

**Cuba**


Spanish words are integrated into this humorous tale about how a grandmother’s advice proves to be valuable.

**Haiti**


Lazy Malese finds a way to trick his neighbors into providing him with a plush lifestyle.

**Japan**


Based on a Japanese folktale, Billy Brown neglects his mother’s warning to stay covered while sleeping and when he wakes up, he finds his belly button gone. Billy tricks the Belly Button Beastie into returning it.

**Palestine**


The difference between right and wrong comes through loud and clear with this story about the Tunjur, the Arabic word for cooking pot.

**Panama**


Spanish words are integrated into this humorous tale where a little rabbit outwits some bullies with a little help from his aunt.

**Russia**


Judging others based on one’s own experiences as opposed to other’s stories is the theme that is illustrated in this charming story.

**SUGGESTED NONFICTION TRADE BOOKS**

Most school and public libraries contain sets of country books appropriate for young readers. Some examples are listed below.

**Countries: Faces and Places [set/series]. Child’s World. (Grades 3-6).**

Set of 15 books.

**Countries of the World [set/series]. Bridgestone Books (Capstone Press). (Grades K-3)**

Set of 40 books.

**GAMES AROUND THE WORLD**


**INTERNET SITES**

Ask Asia: [www.askasia.org/](http://www.askasia.org/)


Kids Culture Center: [www.kidsculturecenter.com/](http://www.kidsculturecenter.com/)


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