



## **DIVERSITY MEMO : Using Storytelling to Celebrate Special Events in your school or organization**

**Dear Teacher / Leader,**

The school year is full of landmark days that acknowledge important historical moments and people. These days, like Martin Luther King, Jr. Day or International Women's Day and even months, like Hispanic Heritage Month, offer us valuable opportunities to learn more about our culture and history. However, there are also important events taking place close to home and related to your particular school that you may want to acknowledge and celebrate with a special event.

Perhaps your school has an important anniversary coming up, a beloved teacher is retiring, or some leaders in your neighborhood are opening a new community center. Taking the time to create a commemorative local event allows your students to celebrate their community while gaining a deeper connection to the individuals who make it unique.

This *RaceBridges Diversity Memo* provides some ideas for using stories as the foundation for creating a commemorative or celebratory event. This Race Bridges for Schools website is full of stories and lesson plans about using Storytelling in the classroom that will help along the way. This Memo will guide you through some key steps to get you started.

Enjoy!

# Classroom Activities

This brief lesson-starter is geared to get you started planning a commemorative event for your classroom or school. These ideas can be adapted to suit the needs of your classroom and a whole-classroom group action is suggested at the end.



First, identify the date, occasion, community place or person that you will be commemorating. The idea may come from your students or perhaps you already have something in mind.

Form small working groups and ask students to brainstorm for ten minutes to list everything they already know about the subject. Remind your students when brainstorming that everyone's voice is important and no judgment is allowed.

When time is up, ask a representative from each group to present the group's ideas and gather them on the board or on big sheets of paper so everyone can see.

Ask the entire class to add ideas to the big list along the lines of:

- Feelings that people might have about the subject;
- The historical importance of this event;
- Who will be or has already been affected by the event.

Next, look at all of the lists together and ask your students the following questions:

- Which ideas are the most interesting to you?
- What draws you in and makes you curious?
- What do you want to know more about?

The ideas that generate your students' curiosity could be the driving ideas for your event. Now, turn these main points of interest into questions and invitations for stories.

For example, if you are celebrating the school founding, students might decide to focus on how contemporary students still reflect the founding values. They might compose an invitation for other students like, **"Tell me a story about a time when you acted like a leader"**.

Or, as another example, if you are examining the impact of the new community center, compose a story invitation for parents and friends like **"Tell me a story about an important life lesson you learned from someone in our community"**.

Now, with your story invitations to lead the way, your students can begin to tell their own stories or interview others. They could also use these story invitations as prompts to create drawings, paintings, personal essays, or a series of photographs.

## Learning Goals

Have your students set some goals for a successful event. Ask them to compose one-sentence statements of what they hope will be accomplished by their event.

**"I hope people will be proud of their school".**

**"I hope I understand the community better".**

**"I want everyone to feel included in our school".**

Students can read these aloud to the class or post them on a bulletin board. You could also save this step for after you've completed the event as collective reflections. These might be:

**"Yes, we can learn from the past for today."**

**"This (event) (person) needs to be remembered and cherished."**

**"We all have roots"**

### Some ideas to get started in the classroom.

Your special event will be grounded in stories collected from your students, stories from others at school, and possible members of the community. Think about who has a story that you want to be sure to include and reach out to them.

You can develop these starter ideas as far as you like, depending on how much time you have and the type of event you'd like to create.

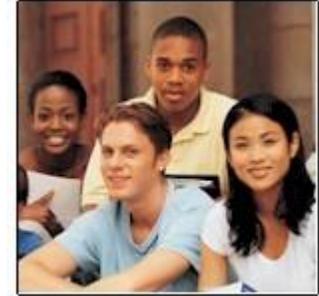


- Practice storytelling and listening by partnering students in pairs. Give each pair six minutes (three minutes each) to tell each other a story that relates to the event. When time is up, bring the group back together to discuss their experiences. What does it feel like to tell a story? What is it like to listen?
- Interview students outside of your class or other members of the community. Encourage students to be creative about how they offer story invitations. Consider having your students document the stories with audio or video recorders.
- Have students collect stories from others and then present them back to the class as first person monologues, that is, to tell the story as if it is their own story. Have students pay attention to details, emotions, and qualities of the storyteller. This exercise encourages empathy and builds public speaking skills. These monologues could be performed at the event.
- Have students work in pairs or small groups to improvise scenes based on stories they've collected. Give them ten or fifteen minutes to develop a first pass at their idea and then have student groups perform their scenes for each other. These scenes could be performed at the event.
- After your students have identified the stories they want to share at the event and how they want to share them (read out loud, performed as monologues, or in improvised scenes) give them time to practice and build confidence. A few times in front of their classmates and getting comfortable speaking in front of the group will help.
- For other ideas check out the Storytelling Guide and Theatre Games at [RaceBridgesStudio.com](http://RaceBridgesStudio.com)

# A Checklist for Teachers :: USING STORYTELLING FOR YOUR SCHOOL EVENTS

Check these out before diving into the topic.

Inviting the whole school or members of the community to participate. Give people enough notice so that they can contribute stories and attend the event.



- ✓Invite others to participate
- ✓Determine where your event will take place
- ✓Be sure to reserve your site well in advance.
- ✓Stock up on supplies
- ✓You will want to collect initial brainstorming ideas on the board or on large white sheets of paper.
- ✓Also think about documentation of your work. Are recorders or flip cameras available?
- ✓Make space for stories in the classroom
- ✓Consider establishing one part of the room for ongoing work with stories and event preparation.
- ✓Model positive energy

These planning and storytelling activities may be unfamiliar to your students. Your confidence and enthusiasm will encourage them to keep an open mind.

- ✓Establish Group agreements

Group agreements build trust among students. They are most effective when the group determines them together through a quick brainstorming exercise. Some helpful agreements might be: Use “I statements”, no interrupting, and respect each other’s differences. Your group may have other suggestions as well. You can compose these together and keep them posted in the room as a reminder.

- ✓Use Safe Stories

Be sure to remind your students that this exercise is about stories that are safe and non- threatening. If any issues or discomfort arises with your class, often a simple acknowledgment of feelings, fears or discoveries can put everyone at ease. Remind the class that we build community as we get to know each other.

# Resources :: USING STORYTELLING FOR YOUR SCHOOL EVENTS

These resources will be useful as you explore ideas for your story-gathering and storytelling for your special event.

## **Storytelling: A Toolkit for Bridging Differences and Creating Community.**

This resource provides an easy to follow process for using storytelling to increase understanding, grapple with new ideas, and grow into more respectful and compassionate people. The activities can be used to prepare for a commemorative event or discuss a recent conflict. The activities in the resource can be completed all at once or broken up over several meetings.



## **Theatre Games**

These are easy to follow theatre games that have been adapted to encourage personal development, strengthen relationships among diverse students, and transform the classroom. The games build energy, ensemble, and collaboration skills, while helping students find their own voices as storytellers, listen actively to others and improvise material.

**The above lesson plans and resources can be found at [RaceBridgesStudio.com](http://RaceBridgesStudio.com)**

## **Further Recommended Resources**

This link <http://education.goodmantheatre.org/open-systems-on-wbez/> will take you to a project description and audio file of a story-based play commemorating five years since Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the Gulf Coast. The project was developed through student research and writing in collaboration with a teaching artist at Chicago's Goodman Theatre. This project can serve as an example of the type of performance event you could create with your own students.

# Words to Remember :: USING STORYTELLING FOR YOUR SCHOOL EVENTS

Use these quotations at the beginning of the lesson or unit to spark student interest; try having students respond to them in writing or discuss them in small groups.



**“A community needs a soul if it is to become a true home for human beings. You, the people must find this soul.”**

- Pope John Paul II

**“The more you praise and celebrate your life, the more there is in life to celebrate.”**

- Oprah Winfrey

**“Without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community.”**

- Anthony Burgess

# Reflections :: USING STORYTELLING FOR YOUR SCHOOL EVENTS

Use these questions to inspire your own thinking and teaching about the topic.

- Share your plans with your colleagues and administration and see if they would like to be involved or provide some support toward your event.
- Who would be a good partner on this? How can you get them involved?
- Remember that some people find it easy to tell stories, while others struggle to think of anything to say or don't believe that "anything important has ever happened" to them.
- What feelings come up for you when you're asked to talk about yourself?
- Set an example for your students by sharing a story of your own. This way, you provide an example of tone and suggested length while modeling willingness and enthusiasm.



**The stories of our lives are both the things that *happen to us* as well as the things that *we make happen around us*.  
What life story are you creating for yourself?**