

Walk in Another's Shoes

by Judy Thibault Klevins

The trim, silver-haired man sits ramrod straight, a legacy of his former military training. Sitting close by, not quite as still or straight, his eight-year-old Swapping Stories partner's smile reflects his own. After the storytelling session, the former Mr. America finalist states, "Even though there's a 75-year difference in our ages, we've had very similar experiences." His African American female partner describes their exchange as "talking to him like he was my father." How did two former strangers build a bridge of understanding that spanned their cultural, racial, age, and gender differences? They participated in Swapping Stories, an intergenerational/intercultural project that I created to link 4th graders and seniors who participate in programs at a center near the elementary school. Each person tells a story to a partner, and then re-tells the other's story as if it happened to them. By seeing the world through their partners' eyes, they understood the other's point of view on the world. What can deepen our tolerance for others more than empathy? What better way to develop empathy than to swap stories—literally share and then exchange the telling of personal experience narratives?

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, in *Understanding by Design*, describe empathy as the ability to get inside peoples' feelings and worldviews. We can see others' points of view and have empathy for them or their situation, yet not agree with them. Even if we find people puzzling or distasteful, seeing the world through their eyes helps us better understand and tolerate their points of view. When we have empathy, we find what is plausible, sensible, or meaningful in the ideas and actions of others and our understanding improves immensely. Point of view exchanges such as those in Swapping Stories build this type of tolerance and empathy.

Preparatory Workshops Are Essential

Asking people to share their stories could have negative as well as positive outcomes. If seniors are expecting children to dress and act like they did 70 years ago, they will be surprised and perhaps uncomfortable. If participants haven't had listening and speaking training and don't have suitable subjects, the stories may be too long, inappropriate, or unintelligible. In a Swapping Stories project, two or three workshops prepare participants to choose and structure stories, to improve speaking and listening skills, and to practice storytelling. Preparation promotes confidence and success, which helps participants feel safer and more open to understanding "others." Separate student and senior workshops allow for open communication and specialized preparation for each group.

In initial sessions, participants are introduced to the "other" group through pictures, writing, and consensus-building factual exercises. In one project, students were eager to meet the senior who used a walker to "line dance" and the professional artist whose works they admired. Seniors were touched by student artwork and writing and wanted to know more about the sensitive authors.

Prior to meeting, participating groups agree on suitable story topics (which have included "Talk about how you successfully handled a scary situation" and "Describe how your family celebrates your favorite holiday.") Whatever the topic, it's important for the story to be about a specific instance, not a general glowing description of someone or someplace. This helps seniors to focus their stories and students to be specific in answering the questions.

To re-tell stories in the first person, a listener must visualize the storyteller's world. Listeners also learn how to ask clarifying questions until they can see the other's point of view. Using this process, storytellers are more likely to suspend judgment, not interrupting or giving advice.

The actual interviewing and story re-telling take place during a meeting of all of the participants. Interviewing in groups solves logistical problems and reminds participants of good practices experienced in the preparatory workshops. Joint interviewing promotes easy supervision.

Additional Benefits

In addition to promoting empathy and understanding by bridging cultural and generational gaps, Swapping Stories celebrates local oral histories and folklore. The stories tend to be archetypal in scope--about saving lives or being saved, finding love, and overcoming fear or adversity. Stories have been recorded, edited, broadcast on local cable, and archived in community libraries.

School and senior groups have sponsored video "premieres" for family, friends, and the community. Paula Endo, award-winning director of Arlington's Columbia Heights West Teen Photo Project (see 2000 CARTS Newsletter), attended a premiere and found "the taped storytelling sessions were truly poignant and at times amazing in the depth of what the pair of storytellers shared with each other and all of us, as each spoke in the other's voice."

Storytellers even find they can better see their own world through their partner's eyes. One Swapping Stories participant reported, "When another person tells your story in the first person, they have more emotional distance from the overwhelming feelings of the event and can re-tell it in a way that listeners can better understand themselves and other members of their community."

Participants increase knowledge and social skills. Seniors can come to know how today's children learn fairness through games just as they did when they were young; young people can hear about what it was like to live through the Korean War from someone who did just that.

Who Has Swapped?

Federal felons in a halfway house and college students in teacher preparation programs have found the Swapping Stories process profoundly affecting. The project just "went international" after a recent workshop at the National Association of Partners in

Education Global Summit in Washington, DC. The Swapping Stories process has proven successful in many settings, and participants would agree with the professor who reported, "My students found this experience to be not only one of the most meaningful and helpful experiences in the course, but also in their entire teacher preparation program."

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