

FICTION FROM ARTIFACT: A MULTICULTURAL WRITING WORKSHOP

In many of your “country profiles” in social studies, you come across artifacts of a culture: textiles such as Hmong pa’ndau, Pakistani handwoven carpets, Chilean arpilleras; figures such as Guatemalan trouble dolls, Russian nesting dolls, Native American Kachinka dolls; daily tools such as engraved Chinese chopsticks; folk art such as Ukrainian eggs; and musical instruments such as a Mbundu marimba, etc.

Using artifacts to generate stories can help you get students’ “hands-on” a culture. This following workshop can be conducted within the parameters of one culture, or it can be used to explore a variety of cultures. You may bring in artifacts belonging to you or your colleagues, or invite students to bring in their own. Depending on the number of artifacts available, students can write their stories individually or participate in small or large group stories. As always, model each step first for them, with an artifact in your hand.

1. Distribute artifacts. Discuss their use or meaning. Encourage students to apply all their senses to “know” the artifact, and write their impressions, adjectives, etc.
2. Ask the students to think of a character from the culture who might use this artifact. Have them describe this character on scrap paper. (Avoid “American in a foreign country” point of view.)
3. Ask the students to think of a problem this character might face with this artifact. (Loss or breakage of artifact, creation of artifact, inability to use artifact properly.) This will begin the story. Then have them think of how this problem could be solved by the character. This is the ending of the story.
4. Now they must figure out the plotting of the story--how the character gets from problem to solution. Prompt them with questions: Are there other characters who can help? (Dialogue!) Are there tools that can help? (Action!) Are there obstacles preventing the character from solving the problem easily? (Suspense!)
5. Research to supply details. After the children have their first drafts, have them research the culture more deeply. Then they can weave in descriptions of the settings and character’s clothes, houses, food, climate, etc.
6. Revise, and display stories with their artifacts, and enjoy!

Pegi Deitz Shea has published Tangled Threads, The Carpet Boy’s Gift, Ten Mice for Tet, Whispering Cloth and other multicultural fiction & nonfiction.