

Storytelling: Striving for Peace Through Shared Experience

A proposal by: Elizabeth Gessinger '08, Rachel Johnson '08 and Jacob Reuter '08

South African youth today stand in the aftermath of nearly a century of structural and physical violence. This generation faces circumstances of a rapidly changing country and the prospect of facilitating change and creating a peaceful, productive South Africa. To facilitate greater understanding and appreciation among diverse members of South African society, as well as provide a constructive, safe and fun after-school environment, we propose to run a creative storytelling workshop for high school students of various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

According to the International Storytelling Center, “Stories bear the seeds of peace and reconciliation, both because a feel for story is part of what it means to be human and because of the inherent nature of conflict”¹. We believe that the opportunity to share one’s unique experience has the power to transcend the differences among people. While we understand that this project has the potential to surface sensitive issues, our intention is not to dwell on painful histories, but rather to explore our personal and common experiences through fun and creativity. The promotion of peace, understanding and compassion among peers through creative self-expression can provide the impetus for progressive thinking.

Over the course of six weeks, we will conduct hour and a half long after-school workshops at least twice a week with a group of about 20 high school students from two racially diverse schools to exchange thoughts and express identities through several creative mediums. Each week will focus on a different approach to storytelling. We plan to teach storytelling through bookmaking, photography, family interviews and screen-printing. These workshops will evolve from an introspective, personal portrayal to the collective understanding of shared experience. Through this work, we hope to cultivate a dialogue of peace among peers. Every aspect of this project will be aimed towards a holistic, community based effort for facilitating peace. Our goals include:

- Organize and lead a storytelling workshop, which provides various creative venues for reflection, self-expression and community engagement.
- Assist in a constructive, meaningful dialogue about peace among students of various socio-economic and racial backgrounds within a supportive, community.
- Invite other community members to impart local knowledge and skill to the students participating in our workshop. This will also keep our workshop grounded in cultural sensitivity.
- Display a final collaborative project of the students’ work to the community, which will unite members spanning generations and races in the peace making effort. It is our ultimate hope that students will be left not only with the physical products of their expressions but also a lasting ability to interact peacefully

We have established connections with two local non-profit organizations, The Direct Action Center for Peace and Memory and the District Six Museum. We have had several email exchanges with Yasir Henri, director at the DACPM; his enthusiasm for the project is a key component of its success. Mr. Henri has directed us to the District Six Museum for further in-country support. The District Six Museum emphasizes the power of self-realization and community building through storytelling. We have had several

detailed conversations with Mandy Sanger from the DSM in which she has expressed a great deal of excitement and support for the project as it strongly resonates with the museum's goals. Her involvement with the project thus far has led us to a diverse group of high school students as well as a potential workshop space. We have contacted Principal Malangabe of Langa High School and Principal Rumboll of Cedar House School, expressing our interest in working with their students and appealing to them for oversight and assistance. We are continuing to pursue these contacts, and anticipate that our current affiliation with the DACPM and the District Six Museum will solidify our connection to local high schools students.

Prior to our arrival in Cape Town, we will identify the workshop space and the students participating. We plan to send each school a detailed flyer to spark interest among the student body. Interested students will then submit a short proposal, which will be reviewed by their faculty. It is imperative that the chosen students are not only enthusiastic about the workshop, but will also gain the most from the experience. This process will not be based on academic merit, but on character and potential.

We will be participants and learners of this workshop as much as the students, creating our own projects and reflections through the proposed mediums. We will also document this workshop through a combination of photography, film, and writing which will be published on a website for all to access. Finally, this six-week workshop will culminate in a collaborative project that incorporates diverse conceptions of peacemaking as understood and envisioned by the students. This project, as well as the collection of creative works developed over the course of the workshop, will be displayed in the DSM to the community and presented by the students themselves.

Our respective degrees in cultural anthropology and sociology with an emphasis on multiculturalism contribute to a wider understanding of cultural sensitivity as well as to the importance of creating identity through storytelling. Rachel has worked in the public defender's office for family law and has mentored inner-city high school students to develop several service learning projects. Jacob has extensive experience leading wilderness and service trips for young adults and he has participated in Best Buddies, an international program aimed at integrating the developmentally challenged with regular education students. Elizabeth has over 80 hours of in-classroom teaching experience as a teacher's aide in Colorado Springs, and has also taught children sailing lessons for three summers. We are all prepared to share our own stories and experiences with the students to communicate cross-national and cross-generational themes of peace.

In preparation for our time in South Africa, we have made several efforts to insure our personal safety and cultural sensitivity. We have talked at great length with the Study Abroad office at Colorado College about the potential risks involved in foreign travel. Additionally, we have monitored the SOS and State Department websites to keep an eye on current issues.

While participating in the workshops, we hope that students will become empowered to stimulate a constructive dialogue about peace and to participate actively in local peacemaking. Sharing stories and discussing the common threads of human experience deconstructs social boundaries and can ultimately bring us to a greater understanding of peace. While storytelling does not have the ability to dissolve our differences, we believe that it creates something larger than them—a fundamental understanding of what it means to be human.

Proposed Budget:

Due to travel expenses, we intend to apply for financial support from additional sources (Colorado College Venture Grant, departmental funds, and the Colorado College Center for Service and Learning); this is in an effort to maximize the funds allocated to our project

Transportation:

flights \$1,500 * 3 people \$4,500

ground transportation \$300

transportation for students to and from workshop site \$50/student * 20 students \$1,000

Food:

\$10/day * 3 people * 50 days \$1,500

Housing:

\$200/month/person * 3 people * 2 months \$1,200

Visas (90 days):

\$72 * 3 people \$216

Vaccinations:

\$100 * 3 people \$300

Project Materials:

Book making materials \$10/student * 20 students \$200

Pin hole camera materials and film \$15/student * 20 students \$300

Screen printing frames, ink, squeegees and tee shirts \$15/student * 20 student \$300

Other materials (paper, paint, brushes, colored pencils) \$15/student * 20 students \$300

Final project materials \$15/student * 20 students \$300

Contribution to the DACPM and the DSM:

To be determined after further discussion and negotiation with the organization

Total: \$10,416

Proposed Schedule:

Week One: Arrive in Cape Town. Meet with DACPM and high school faculty to solidify workshop logistics. Buy and prepare materials for workshop and initiate contacts for potential workshop fieldtrips.

Week Two: First meeting with students. Introduce our selves and concepts of the workshop. Begin bookmaking.

Week Three: Family history project. Interview family members on a specific topic or family story and incorporate into books.

Week Four: Build pinhole cameras. Each student will document their daily life experiences and their conceptions of peace.

Week Five: Learn and practice screen-printing. Create tee shirts with messages of peace and distribute to community.

Week Six: Creative workshop of the students' choice. This will lend to the final collaborative project.

Week Seven: Development and display of final project. Community gathering to discuss and view projects.

Return Home: Develop Website, share journals, photos ad videos with school and community.

ⁱ <http://storytellingfoundation.net/resources/articles/neile2.htm>