

INTERSECTIONS: A City of Stories

*Middle school students use book arts and oral history
to explore the diversity of their local community.*

By Jeannie M. Hunt

When I approached my friend Alfie Alschuler, an English teacher at the local middle school, about doing a book arts project in his classroom, I had only a rough idea and a crude model that looked like a city block. Four architectural pop-up books, standing upright, were joined together into a square. Lying flat around them were four accordion road books, made from squares of black paper bound together by a dotted white centerline. My idea seemed simple enough: each student would interview a local immigrant and then create a set of artists' books about the person's life. When the books were finished, we would join them together to create a "city of stories" that represented the diversity of the local community. The house books would describe homelands and histories; the road books would tell stories of travel and transition.

While the idea was simple, we both knew that building our city with eighty students would take teamwork and careful planning. We drafted an eight-week schedule: Alfie would lead the writing workshops and handle classroom management. I would come in twice a week, and would teach mini-lessons on book building, illustration techniques, page layout, and interviewing skills.

BUILDING BLOCKS:

Two children's books had inspired my image of the city block. *Madlenka*, by Peter Sis, is a picture-book about a young girl who walks around her city block and meets neighbors from many lands. *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman, is a middle reader about a neighborhood of immigrants who find common ground by building a community garden. These books were our mentor texts as we studied how authors and illustrators communicate about different cultures.

To introduce bookmaking and interviewing skills, we played the *United Neighbors Game*. Students earned points for conducting mini-interviews with people from different countries, religions, and language groups, and we made a "Planetary Passport" booklet to keep score. This game, and the practice interview sessions with ESL students and classroom guests, allowed students to build confidence in reaching out to strangers and in asking questions that would encourage storytelling.

While students finished their final interviews, we built the book structures and went to the library to research the immigrant's homeland. This was followed by writing workshops to transform the interview material into narratives, poetry, and imaginary letters.

To plan the layout of each book, students divided their text, drew thumbnail sketches, and created storyboards. They also wrote paragraphs about the interview, the country, and themselves for the front and back matter of their book. The final week was devoted to completing the artwork. On the last day we brought all four classes together to build our city of

stories, and had a party. During the summer, four of these blocks were exhibited at the public library, allowing the greater community to appreciate the diversity in their town.

BUILDING BOOKS:

For the passport, we folded an origami booklet that I had laid-out on my computer. Page one had a space for name and photo; the last page held a scorecard. The remaining pages, divided into nine geographic areas of the world, were used to collect signatures of the people interviewed. A flap lifted to reveal a map of the world to record birthplaces. We attached a cardstock cover with 3-M #415 double-stick tape, and decorated them with color-Xerox labels.

The road books were made with six squares of heavy black paper, spaced 1/2" apart. They were connected with strips of white artists tape, front and back, and folded accordion-style. Metallic gel pens and colored pencils (*Prismacolor* and *Ticonderoga*) worked well on the black paper.

The house book was based on the origami structures of British book artist Paul Johnson. Heavyweight drawing paper was pre-cut to produce a zigzag roofline and garden curves. I also added a signature of 3 sheets, which was sewn into the centermost fold. The four panels facing the street were illustrated like a house and garden. The inner panels were used for front and back matter and the signature pages held the story. To connect the house books together, each student also folded a corner piece from thin white paper.

The two-pocket carrying pouch, which I learned from Susan Gaylord, was made from white drawing paper and decorated with cultural motifs.

BUILDING COMMUNITY:

The City of Stories project explored the intersections of text and images on the page, of classroom and community, and of oral and written traditions of storytelling. It also created opportunities for the intersections of people from different generations, cultures, and experiences. The benefits of these intersections extended beyond the academic curriculum, beyond the classroom—and into the lives of the students and the residents of the local community.

Some students interviewed parents or grandparents, and learned new things about their own families, and themselves. Some interviewed neighbors and developed a greater awareness of the diversity in their own town. Many students interviewed members of the school community, including ESL students, teachers and staff. The ESL students, who usually have difficulty meeting other students, were suddenly mini-celebrities. Students sought them out and marveled at their stories.

As people shared the joys and hardships of their journeys, the power of storytelling worked its magic. Connections were made, becoming the seeds for new understandings and new friendships. And students learned that they could become agents of change in their own community, through the simple act of reaching out.

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Artist Bio:

Jeannie M. Hunt is a book artist, illustrator and education specialist. Her own art work explores family history, sacred space, and a sense of place in books that flip over, pop up and fold out into inventive and whimsical shapes. In 1998, she received a grant to travel to Guatemala to research indigenous textile and paper arts and to create a series of artists' books related to the culture and the landscape. Jeannie offers bookmaking workshops for children, teachers and families in a variety of community settings. She is a long-time member of the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and is a graduate of the Ada Comstock Scholars Program at Smith College. She lives in Northampton, MA.