



Storytelling using folk ballads in Secondary Schools

By Amy Douglas





The Full English

The Full English was a unique nationwide project unlocking hidden treasures of England's cultural heritage by making over 58,000 original source documents from 12 major folk collectors available to the world via a ground-breaking nationwide digital archive and learning project. The project was led by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and in partnership with other cultural partners across England.

The Full English digital archive (www.vwml.org) continues to provide access to thousands of records detailing traditional folk songs, music, dances, customs and traditions that were collected from across the country. Some of these are known widely, others have lain dormant in notebooks and files within archives for decades.

The Full English learning programme worked across the country in 19 different schools including primary, secondary and special educational needs settings. It also worked with a range of cultural partners across England, organising community, family and adult learning events.

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Storytelling using folk ballads in Secondary Schools

Introduction

Storytelling was used with Year 7 students as part of The Full English learning programme at Queensbridge School in Birmingham. It is an ethnically diverse, six form entry, outstanding school. It is also a specialist college in visual and performing arts.

Each term, Queensbridge School has an *iweek* – an intensive week where all pupils are off timetable. In Year 7, this week is used to concentrate on the arts. During the iweek in the autumn term, the Year 7s work for their bronze Arts Award. During the Spring Term, the iweek is used to create a whole year performance.

In 2013/2014, Queensbridge worked with EFDSS to introduce folk arts as part of the Year 7s Bronze Arts Awards and as the main focus for their whole year performance.

Project theme

The school chose canals as the theme for the project and performance. Amazingly, Birmingham is said to have more miles of canal than Venice. The canals are an immensely important part of Birmingham's heritage and have been an integral part of Birmingham's development as the canals took Birmingham's products to the world, and in return, brought the world to Birmingham. They link the past to the present, and inner-city to the sea.

The EFDSS digital archive (www.vwml.org) provided the perfect ballad for the backbone of the performance – *The Cruel Ship's Carpenter*, published in Birmingham. In meetings between folk artists and teaching staff we established a rough outline of how the performance would work, telling the story of the ballad; linking in ideas of white ladies, water spirits protecting the canals; modern day students exploring the canals; the history of the making of the canals; traditional navvie songs; folk dance to bring the main characters together – and sword dance for the dramatic murder.



Storytelling iweek Project Summary

Aims

- To introduce the concept of traditional artforms, EFDSS and the digital archive (www.vwml.org)
- To take ballads from the archive, decipher their language and use them for the basis of stories to tell
- For students to be exposed to a different artistic way of working
- To lead students through the process of choosing, interpreting and telling a story
- To enable students to gain self confidence in presenting and performing a story
- To evaluate the process

Structure

The week was structured with 3 days artist time. In non-artist time the group had a design technology teacher as their tutor for the week and they worked on costumes, making campfires, iweek diaries and evaluation.

Although storytelling can lead into and inform many activities, it is primarily a solo activity. We wanted all members of the storytelling group to tell a story as part of the performance. We decided the best way to incorporate these stories would be to have the storytelling as a prologue; to have students in role as groups of navvies sitting around campfires swapping stories while the audience came through and listened before taking their seats for the central performance. The stories would be based on ballads from the EFDSS digital archive, using ballads from Birmingham wherever possible.

The Group

Year 7 was divided into 6 groups – Drama, Publicity, two visual art groups, Music and Storytelling.

The Storytelling group consisted of 26 students: 21 boys and 5 girls. The class was ethnically diverse.

Session 1 Monday Morning

Story and riddles

The week began gathering the group together to tell some riddles and a story. I told the story of *The Suffolk Miracle* and Beth Gifford (The Full English trainee on the Queensbridge School project) sang the ballad of the same story. I felt it was crucial to establish the atmosphere and mood of the week, to model what storytelling actually is.



Photo: Original manuscript of a version of *The Suffolk Miracle* from www.vwml.org

Name games

Amazing Amy: Each child introduced the child next to them alliteratively – this is Amazing Amy, this is Beautiful Beth, Calm Catherine etc. I wrote name labels as we went around, complete with the alliteration as approved by student. We then moved into a ball-throwing name game.

Introduction to the week

We talked about the project and the archive. We discussed *The Suffolk Miracle* as a song and a story – which was easier to understand? How did they make you

feel? We talked about it being a very old story, but related it to the urban legend of The Hitchhiker and how stories move on with people and changing times.

We compared digging in the canal and finding interesting objects with digging in the EFDSS digital archive. Using the archive is a bit like being a detective, and the stories are written in code.

I had brought a selection of ballads from the archive (see p19 for examples), more than we would need, so that all groups would have a choice of story. I read through one of the ballads and as a group we worked out what it meant.

Then we broke it down into the main bones, i.e., the main plotpoints of the story

Student comment: 'It's like a pop song from the olden days'

Groupwork

While I usually like to let children choose their groups when possible, there is a wide variance in literacy ability at Queensbridge School, with many children using English as a second language. Also there are a substantial number of pupils who struggle with the change in routine structure during iweek. We agreed the teacher would select the groups in advance to achieve balance and support good behaviour.

I gave a plot summary of each ballad orally to the whole class and groups shouted out when they heard a story they wanted to tell. In their groups the students read the ballads and agreed the outline of the story. They identified the main plot points of the story and wrote down 5-7 'bones'.

Tableaux (Freezeframes)

The students were asked to create a tableaux for each *storybone*. This tableaux were to be still, like a photograph or a book illustration. All students should be involved. They were not playing characters, but depicting a scene and encouraged to be houses/doors/horses/cannon balls etc. as required. Physically embodying the bones of the story helps to really set the arc of the story within memory as well as being fun!

Narrate the tableaux

At this point we all came back together as a group to see the tableaux. Each tableaux was narrated by its storybone.



Discussion

We talked about storytelling and what I do – what you expect from a storyteller – this is not a play. We talked about keeping the best bits of the tableaux, but starting to develop the stories and flesh them out.

Macbeth's Witches

The whole class sat in their groups of threes in one big circle and we played Macbeth's witches – using the power of three to inspire creative description. After playing in a group I left them with the teacher and asked them to play with the idea of Macbeth's witches with their own stories the next day while I was not there. They would try telling their stories within their groups, building up the description and playing with the images.

Session 2 - Wednesday Morning

Establishing expectations

We moved into the actual room where they would be performing at the end of the week. The group had worked on building fires and designing costumes. This really helped increase the focus towards where we were heading and make it seem real.

Warm up

Warm ups should be fun, active, but also set the mood and expectation for the session. Beth Gifford split the class in two – we each took a group and arranged them into a boat – a merchant ship and a pirate boat. We built up rhythmical actions from suggestions from the class. Beth led a stylised battle between the two boats leading up to a canon shot to blow both boats up. The warm up was physical and got the students working as a team; into an historical mindset; coming up with descriptions, sounds and actions which would feed into their stories and most importantly, was fun!

Individual work with groups

We had the luxury of being able to work with the groups one at a time while the rest of the class continued with their costumes and fires. We heard each story and were

able to respond to each group's needs: use of voice; working as a team to tell; building description etc.

Some of the groups really began to come up with fantastic descriptions:

*'They fought their way through the smell of cannon smoke,
slipping on pools of blood, to the Pirate Captain'*



Photo: Storytellers at their fire (Frances Watt)

Session 3 – Wednesday afternoon

Game – wink murder

After behaviour warnings over the lunch hour following two days of wet play and a week outside the normal routines, we needed to refocus the group. This game was perfect. It is fun, has lots of opportunity for over-the-top deaths, but needs quiet and concentration. It is also an excellent introduction to making eye contact and how to establish a connection with your listeners.



Groupwork

The groups practised their stories and then told them to another group. We gathered together as a whole group to discuss how the stories were going – how they felt about their own stories and comments on the stories that they had heard.

Game – Blah, blah, blah

After a demonstration, a volunteer group tried telling their story to the class with no words except blah - using gestures, eye contact and tone of voice while saying blah, blah, blah. The initial reaction was '*How can we tell a story without the words, Miss?!*' But it rapidly became one of their favourite games and really moved their stories on. Half of the groups had a go in front of the class. We then split back into story groups and they swapped their story (with words) with a different group. They then came back and the remaining groups told their stories as *blah, blah, blah* to the class.

Session 4 – Thursday Morning

Warm up

A rhythmic re-enactment of some navvie life with suggestions from the group – included digging, puddling the clay, eating and gathering round the fire for a story.

Set up the space

With the aid of lots of tables, blocks and a huge set of blackout curtains we set out the room. The idea was to create two canal banks, with the canal running down the centre of the room. The audience would flow along the canal. The students were up on the banks, dressed as navvies, sitting in groups, swapping stories around their campfires. We had the luxury of a decent lighting rig and were able to set the lighting, going for a low level night-time feel, that enabled us to appreciate the flickering fires, but was also light enough for the audience to be able to see where they were going and for the storytellers to be able to see and connect with their audience.

Practising in the space

All the groups ran through their stories in costume in the space. All the students were excited to be doing it 'for real' and the atmosphere was fantastic.

In group feedback the main considerations were:

- Working out how to sit comfortably while not sitting too close to the edge so that a spontaneous gesture could unbalance you or one of your team!
- Being able to sit so that you would be able to see the audience gathering around
- How to lead the audience in – we decided on one person from each group physically going to gather an audience, ask them to hear a story and bring them back to the fire.



Photo: Storytellers at the Final Performance (Frances Watt)



First performance

With the dress rehearsal looming and the visit of the Lord Mayor imminent, we wanted an audience to practise on, and also wanted the rest of the year to know what we had been up to. So we invited one of the art groups to come and listen to our stories. All the students really stepped up for their first real performance. The arts group students listened really well and gave very encouraging feedback – picking out particular storytellers that ‘spoke really clearly’, ‘had really good description’, ‘their story was sick’, ‘he did this face that was really funny and made us laugh’.

‘I felt good and this time I was not nervous like always’

‘I found it slightly scary but the feedback gave me a bit more confident to perform’

Session 5 – Thursday Afternoon

The dress rehearsal

The Lord Mayor and his entourage came to the school for the dress rehearsal. The students were excited at getting to tell their stories to the Lord Mayor and they did a great job. The Lord Mayor really listened to the stories and talked to the students about the canals, the navvies and how they had found their stories. The Lord Mayor’s wife was interested in folk music and a folk singer so both of them talked about ballads and traditional music.

‘I was scared because of how important the Mayor and Mayoress were but it was fun after they both gave us feedback and we had a chat’

Session 6 – Friday afternoon

(Friday morning the students had told stories again to other Year 7 classes)

There was a short time after lunch before the main performance where we had chance to be fairly relaxed.

The Macarena!

Great silly warm up – they had been taught the dance by their teacher in my absence, so they taught me and even the Head of Year joined in when she put her head around the door.

Evaluation

Throughout the week there has been constant evaluation. The students have kept diaries throughout the week and after exercises and groupwork we have always come back as a whole groups to swap comments of how the students have found activities – what is difficult, what is fun, how they think they are doing etc. This was chance for a quick ten minute written reflection.

'I enjoyed the week and I found it fun though there were some ups and downs. My downs were the distractions made by other people. My ups were performing and creating the fires.'

'I really enjoyed this I-week'

'It was a laugh. It was really fun.'

Final performance

The students did fantastically well, as expected, though I had to leave them to it to tell a story in the main hall. Parents came through the canal and listened to the stories, then through the door into the main hall to take their seats for the play.



Photo: The ghosts smiting the cruel ship's carpenter in the final performance (Frances Watt)



End comments

This really was an intensive challenging week. The students were introduced to songs, material and history that was completely new to them. They entered into a completely different routine with teachers they did not know. Of course there were highs and lows, but all the students stretched their language skills; worked in teams and performed confidently in front of peers, parents and VIPS.

Storytelling Exercises

I generally use workshop games and exercises as a fun way of changing the pace, but also illustrating points that can then feed into the ongoing work.

Name games

Aims:

- *To introduce the group to me and each other*
- *To begin thinking about language and rhythm*

Amazing Amy: Each child introduced the child next to them alliteratively – this is Amazing Amy, this is Beautiful Beth, Calm Catherine etc. All students are warned to be polite! We try to keep the momentum going, students are encouraged to ask for help from the group if they are struggling and pick the best. I wrote name labels as we went around, complete with the alliteration as approved by student.

Throwing the ball: All students stand in a circle. I use a toy that goes boing when you hit it, but a bean bag/imaginary ball work well too – nothing too big or bouncy. Person with ball says their own name and the person they are throwing it to. The next person says their name, then the person they are throwing it to etc. Try to keep the momentum going.

Tableaux (Freezeframes)

Aims:

- To help remember the key plot points and sequence of a story
- To explore working in a group
- To begin physicalising a story

Split into groups – ideally between 3 and 7 in a group. Each group takes one story and breaks it down into its essential plot points, usually between 5 and 8 short sentences.

So for example, *The Three Little Pigs*:

- Three pigs build three houses, one of straw, one of sticks and one of bricks
- Wolf comes and blows down house of straw
- Wolf blows down house of sticks
- Wolf tries to blow down house of bricks and can't
- Wolf climbs down the chimney, pigs are ready with a pot of boiling water and wolf is defeated

The group devise a tableaux for each plot point, i.e. they physically make one image with no props but their bodies for each sentence. It can be described as creating a series of photographs – they do not move. The groups should be encouraged to show inanimate objects as well as characters – they will need to show the houses as well as the pigs and wolf.

Notes

- This exercise highlights how, even with a story that we think everyone knows, everyone will remember it slightly differently and will emphasise different aspects of the story – this is the first step to making the story your own and is very important to agree on if telling in a group.
- This can be used with a story researched from a book, or a story you have told.
- I often do this early on with a group using nursery tales such as Three Little Pigs or Cinderella. They are stories that everyone knows and can be chosen quickly. The groups then show each other their tableaux and try to guess which story each group has chosen – if they have chosen the salient points of the story, it should be easy to guess.
- This can also be a useful exercise when a group begin work on a story together. They agree the bones, begin to physicalise it and then can add narration to each of the bones.

Macbeth's Witches

Aims:

- *To develop descriptive language*
- *To hear the effect of repetition and emphasis*

Sit in a circle. We are going to set a ghostly scene. Going round the circle one person says a simple statement. The next person, elaborates on it, and the next. The next person starts the next simple statement. This needs a good demo and will probably start off very simply, but can then go bonkers! While the aim is to develop description, there is nothing wrong with repetition and this can be encouraged to help the rhythm and to make it easier.

E.g.

- It was dark. It was darker than night. It was so dark they had to feel their way with their hands.
- It was cold. It was colder than a freezer. It was colder than an ice block in a freezer at the North Pole
- She was scared. She was so scared she had goose bumps. She was so scared that her knees trembled, her elbows wobbled, she felt like a jelly at a 5 year olds birthday party with a horde of children's mouths coming towards her.

Encourage them to be completely over the top and competitive! It doesn't matter if it gets silly as long as it gives them the confidence to be creative.

Rhythms and Actions (Beth Gifford)

Aim: Vocal and physical warm up/un-inhibitor

Ask participants for different noises specific to the activity or environment they're focussing on, ask for or create actions to go with the different sections. Introduce a beat so everyone is stepping in time and try each sound against the beat, then, as an exercise in following conducting split the group so you have different sounds happening simultaneously, you can also use this for an exercise in louds and softs.

The Grenade (Beth Gifford)

Aims

- *Vocal and physical warm up/un-inhibitor*
- *Getting the group to work together as a team*

Get the group to mime preparing a grenade (with younger groups perhaps a hill or mountain?) When you all throw your grenade follow the shape up then down in a curve with your finger and do this with your voice too, humming is best for this as it protects and warms the voice. Experiment with starting lower or going higher, you can even get participants to lead this one.

Blah blah blah – Telling without words

Aim: To concentrate on the performance of a story: gesture, tone of voice, eye contact etc.

Storytellers are asked to tell their story, but they can only say blah, blah, blah.

Sheepdogs

Aims:

- *Illustrates the importance of talking and listening – each in the appropriate place!*
- *Good partner building exercise*

Get a partner. One partner is the sheepdog and one is the shepherd. Sheepdogs form an inner circle with shepherds standing in outer circle behind them. Sheepdog chooses a name. Go round the circle and shepherds introduce their dogs by name (each sheepdog must have a different name, there can be no duplicates – if there has already been a Shep, you will have to choose another name). Sheepdogs close eyes and shepherds move round in a circle so that they are standing behind a different dog. Shepherds call their dogs and dogs have to find them by following the calls of their shepherd.

Wink murder

Aim: To develop eye contact

The group are seated in a circle. One student is chosen as the detective and leaves the room. One of the remaining students is chosen as the murderer and the detective brought back in. The murderer kills their victims by catching their eye and winking at them. Victims die as spectacularly and as the over the top as they want to! The detective stands in the middle of the circle and tries to work out who the murderer is. They are usually given three guesses, but ammend to the size of your group.



Photo: Sword dancing in the final performance (Frances Watt)

Ballad Story Bones

Love for Love

www.vwml.org/record/LEB/9/148/1

- Rich young woman falls in love with a sailor.
- She dresses up as a poor maid and tells him of her love saying she's too poor for him to marry her.
- He says, don't worry, I'm not rich, but I've got a bit saved up and I'll work for the both of us.
- They get married and once they've tied the knot, the young woman reveals that she's actually very rich and they're both set for life.

My Poor Black Bess

www.vwml.org/record/LEB/9/212/1

www.vwml.org/record/FK/13/36/1

- Dick Turpin describes his life as a highway man with his faithful horse, Black Bess.
- Dick Turpin kills his horse to put it out of its misery and save it from the bloodhounds
- Writes the song as an ode to his horse.



The Outlandish Knight

www.vwml.org/record/LEB/9/364/1

- Young rich woman falls in love with a strange knight from the North.
- He persuades her to take some of her father's money and horses and run away with him.
- He takes her to a remote cliff by the sea, tells her that he's already murdered 6 young women and that she is to be the seventh, he's going to push her off the cliff.
- He tells her to take off her fine clothes, they're too good to rot in the sea, he's going to sell them.
- She asks him to turn his back so he doesn't see her naked.

- When his back is turned she grabs him and throws him off the cliff to his death instead.
- She rides back home and slips in before everyone wakes up.
- The parrot hears her and she bribes it not to tell anyone with a golden cage.

The Lovers' Downfall

www.vwml.org/record/LEB/9/257/1

- Betsy and James fall in love
- Betsy's parents betroth her to James' brother
- James kills his brother
- Betsy asks to meet James.
- Betsy goes to the meeting disguised as a man
- James kills her thinking it is another man after Betsy
- When James realises what he's done he shoots himself

The Lass of ...town

www.vwml.org/record/LEB/9/268/1

- Beautiful girl is weeping and soldier asks why?
- She says it is for her soldier love who left her 8 years ago
- Soldier says forget him, he's never coming back, have me instead
- She says she'll never love anyone else, but her William
- Soldier says, oh, I've heard of him, he's dead, come away with me.
- She still says no
- Soldier reveals that he is indeed her William, come back to see if she still loves him and they both live happy ever after



Granny's Armchair

www.vwml.org/record/AW/5/145

- Person is left Granny's armchair while his sister and are left £100 and make fun of him.
- Hero of the song looks after the armchair, until one day the bottom falls out and he finds £2000 stuffed inside.

The London Lady

www.vwml.org/record/LEB/9/398/1

- Beautiful rich lady says she will only marry a man who had won honours at war
- Two brothers came to see her
- She takes them to see the lions at The Varieties
- The lady throws her fan in with the lions and says whichever of you will get it will win my hand.
- One brother refuses to go, the other braves the lion, rescues the fan and she marries him.

The Female Highwayman

www.vwml.org/record/GG/1/17/1084

- Maid dresses up as a highwayman and stops her lover's coach.
- She steals all his riches, and asks for his diamond ring
- He gives her everything but the ring, which he won't part with
- She and her lover are walking a few days later and he sees his watch hanging at her side
- She confesses she was the highwayman – and if he had given up the ring she had given her, she would have killed him.
- But he didn't give up the ring so they got married!

Cold Blows The Wind

www.vwml.org/record/FK/19/68/1

- Man is grieving for his lost love for a year and a day.
- After a year of tears, the girl comes back and asks him to stop weeping.
- He asks for just one kiss
- She replies, 'If I kiss you, with my cold clay lips, your time would not be long'



Canadee-i-o

www.vwml.org/record/COL/3/7A

- Young woman falls in love with a sailor. He leaves her to go to Canada. She wants to go and enlists on his ship.
- The sailor doesn't want to know her anymore, but the Captain dresses her as a man and looks after her.
- When they come to Canada, the Captain marries her.



The Silly Old Man

www.vwml.org/record/FK/20/10/2

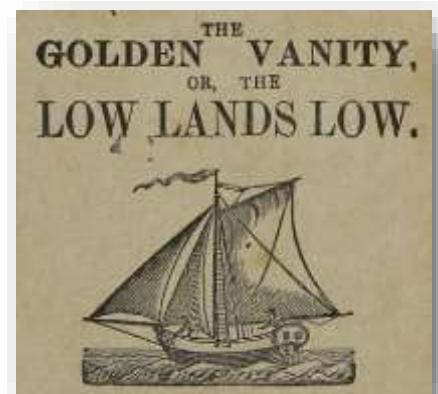
www.vwml.org/record/SBG/1/4/19

- Old man goes to pay his rent. Highwayman in disguise rides beside him and asks him where he's carrying his money.
- Highwayman tries to rob in, but old man throws saddle with money over the hedge.
- When Highwayman goes to reclaim it, the old man steals the Highwayman's horse and it turns out the saddlebags are filled with gold and the old man is now rich

The Golden Vanity

www.vwml.org/record/SBG/1/6/67

- Ship is in trouble, going to be sunk by a Spanish ship of war.
- Cabin boy offers to sink the ship if Captain will reward him.
- Captain offers him gold, silver and the hand of his daughter.
- Boy swims to Spanish Galleon and sinks it, swims back to his own ship, but Captain leaves him to drown.
- Crew try to save him, but it's too late and he dies.



Captain Coulston and The Pirate Ship

www.vwml.org/record/FK/16/186/2

- Ship sails away with emigrants to America.
- They are set upon by pirates. Captain Coulston and his passengers – particularly one young man and his sweetheart battle bravely against the odds.
- The sweetheart shoots the pirate captain and Captain Coulston captures the pirate ship and brings her to America



The Undaunted Female

www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/9/3325

- Maid is set upon by ruffian, she kills him.
- Rich man hears commotion and comes.
- Ruffian's gang come, rich man shoots one, maid the other three.
- Rich man and maid get married



Photo: Year 7 students doing their final performance (Frances Watt)

Biography

Amy Douglas

Amy Douglas is a vibrant professional storyteller with a passion for traditional stories and riddles. She first discovered storytelling at a folk festival in her teens and has been a devotee of the art ever since, broadening her knowledge, experience and skills as a storyteller as well as promoting and celebrating the art form.



Over the past twenty years she has delved deep into the folklore of Britain, revelling in tales of the strange and macabre; memories of magic and other worlds; proud recollections of folk history; stories to make you smile, sigh or shiver; stories that have been moulded by the land, weather and generations of tongues wagging.

In 1993 Amy was awarded the first ACEWM Storytelling Apprenticeship and spent a year studying with professional storytellers throughout Britain and America, beginning a lifelong friendship and mentorship with Scottish Traveller storyteller, Duncan Williamson. Amy was a founder member of both the Tales at the Edge storytelling club and Festival at the Edge international storytelling festival and served two years as a Director of the Society for Storytelling. Amy now has two decades of experience as a performer, workshop leader, oral historian, project manager and award winning author.

Amy is passionate about using storytelling in schools. Storytelling is an imaginative, inspiring, intrinsically human artform, effective at describing emotion, building empathy, exploring places we may never go, bonding a group and building shared experiences. Inspiring children into a love of language at an early age can dramatically change the course of their learning career. As they grow, storytelling can help explore difficult concepts, provide a frame-work for learning new skills and build self-confidence. Storytelling is the perfect medium for inspiring creative thought, with the possibility to lead into a wide range of exploratory, arts and creative writing avenues. Most importantly, it is fun!

<http://amydouglas.com/>



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