

## Telling Stories With String

Did you learn Cat's Cradle when you were in school? String figures and string stories have been around for almost as long as people have been on earth. It is impossible to name a continent which does not have its own set of figures representing the people, objects and animals found there. The Navajo used string figures as a way to encourage the memorization needed for the complicated patterns involved in weaving and sand painting. Some cultures used figures as astronomical devices. Other cultures used them in religious ceremonies. Most often string figures have been used just for fun. They have helped many long winter nights to pass quickly in an igloo or a hogan.

When children learn to create string figures, they are exercising their powers of concentration and coordination and creating paths of muscular memory. Learning a new skill, such as this, can sometimes be frustrating, but it just takes a little patience. The reward is always worth the effort.

Yarn doesn't make a very good string figure because it is too flimsy and can't hold a shape, but a more sturdy twine or nylon cord is excellent. Nylon cord can be melted together very quickly so that there is no need for a knot. The hardware store or the rope section of the department store has a great selection.

Third grade and above are good ages to learn string figures successfully. Younger children need a lot of one-on-one to accomplish the task, but there are other things they can do.

## Using String With Younger Children

### String Challenges

#### Grade Level: Preschool to Grade 1

**Objectives:** To recognize letters  
To recreate a random shape.  
To understand the commands: in/out, over, under etc.  
To understand the body as a unit of measurement.

**Material:** A length of string for each child that is about three feet long.

#### Procedure:

- ◆ Use string as a measuring device. Put a knot on how tall you are. Measure the knot against friends and objects in the classroom.
- ◆ Drape a length of string on the floor. What shapes does it make? Draw

a picture from that shape.

- ◆ Put a string on the floor and make a circle. Step IN the circle. Step OUT. Step AROUND. Step OVER. Jump OVER. Step ON. Step BETWEEN two circles. Step BESIDE your circle. Practice your prepositions.
- ◆ Place your string in the shape of a line. Bend it to make a J. Make a U. Have each student make a K. (It can be done more than one way) Have two students go together and make a K. Have four students make a K. Try two students with a P. Three students can make a B.
- ◆ Make a snake on the floor. Make an S from the snake. Turn the S into a 5. Turn the 5 into a 2.
- ◆ Make an M on the floor. Stand so you are facing the M. When you hear the magic word, move your body so you are looking at a W. Move your body so you are looking at an E. Move your body so you are looking at a 3.
- ◆ Make puppets. Hold your string so you have a little in each hand and do Jack and Jill. (Show Jack and then Jill.) Went up the hill. (Make the hill.) To fetch a pail of water. (Show the pail.)

### **Evaluation:**

Are the strings used in a purposeful manner in each activity?

Do the children remain engaged as they solve the problems?

Do students consistently measure their height accurately against others and against objects?

(Activities for this list were adapted from the Spring Newsletter of Dave Titus

<http://www.Storyteller-Wordsmith.com> )

## **Using String With Older Children**

During String Figure Workshops, I teach The Fishing Spear and the Winking Eye. I teach the figure to the whole group and we divide into smaller groups to learn. As children catch on, they'll teach each other until everyone will know the figure. These figures and others can be learned from books which I list below. Digging into the books will provide lots of ways to build on the new skills learned.

Take a look at the International String Figure Association Website at <http://www.isfa.org> . Click on the links to other websites. Try "How To Play Cat's Cradle" and "Jacob's Ladder- an animated lesson." The steps on the website and in the books listed in the bibliography will be fun for you and your students to try.

Following are some lesson ideas you might wish to try.

## **Lesson Ideas**

### **How Do We Know About People and Customs From The Past?**

**Grade Level:** 3-6

**Objectives:**

- To understand how geography affects people
- To recognize the professions which preserve culture

**Materials:**

Resources to research the following people: **Alan Lomax, Richard Chase, Zora Neal Hurston, Margaret Mead.**

**Procedure:**

- ◆ Ask students how they think string figures have survived through time. The Navajo, Inuit (Eskimo) and the Pacific Island people are considered to have the richest string culture. Recently, experts have noted that other cultures such as the Cherokee, the Apache, the Pawnee, the Chippewa, and the Osage may have had a much wider use of string figures than originally suspected. Why did the Navajo, the Inuit and the Pacific Island Tribes hold on to so many of their string figures? Tell students that the isolated cultures like the Navajo, the Inuit and those in the remote Pacific Islands were the last to be influenced by other expanding civilizations. It is suspected that the inhospitable locations of the Navajo, the Inuit and the Pacific Islanders protected the more fragile pieces of their culture, like string figures.
- ◆ Define the words anthropologist, folklorist and musicologist. What does each profession do?
- ◆ Have the class research the people listed above and present their findings.
- ◆ Ask a member of one or more of those professions to come in and talk about what they do.

**Evaluation:**

Can students tell what each profession does and give examples of people who have worked in that profession?

Can students explain what allowed the Navajo, Inuit and Pacific Islanders to retain their string cultures?

# Learning New Figures

**Intended Grade Level:** 3-8

**Objectives:**

- To understand the way of life of groups of people around the world.
- To solve problems collaboratively

**Materials needed:**

- Garden Twine- see books by Camilla Gryski in bibliography for a good description of appropriate string material. Each child needs about three and a half feet.
- A collection of string books noted in the bibliography accompanying this lesson.

**Procedure:**

- ◆ Photo copy some of the easier string figures from the books in the bibliography. (The Moth and the String Trick from Gryski's *Many Stars String Games* are good starters)
- ◆ Share the book collection and/or the copied figures with the class.
- ◆ Locate the countries of origin on the map and discuss why those figures originated in that culture.
- ◆ Find examples of what the figure represents in the artwork, natural world or locate photographs of people at play and work from that country.
- ◆ Create a place in the classroom where children can work on learning a string figure using the photocopies or learn a figure as a class. Some children will learn faster and can help the others until everyone is successful.

**Evaluation:**

- Do the students speculate about the cultures of origin of other string figures in the books? Are the children able to make the figures on their own?

## Bibliography

- ◆ Fleishman, Paul. *Lost: A Story In String*. Henry Holt, N.Y.,2000. A grandmother tells a story about a young girl who gets lost and uses her wits and what is available to survive in the snow. Directions are given at the back.
- ◆ Hindley, Judy. *A Piece Of String Is A Wonderful Thing* Illustrated by Margaret Chamberlain. Candlewick Press, N.Y., 1993. The history of string told in rhyme. There are lots of accompanying facts. A great book to extend an interest in string.

- ◆ Gryski, Camilla. *Cat's Cradle String Games*. Kid's Can Press, Toronto, 1983. An excellent book to use with children. The illustrations are very clear. This author has many books about string on the market and they are all very good.
- ◆ Dave Titus has a great video called *String Magic From Around the World*. I have borrowed this video from the library. It teaches several string figures very well. He also offers a big bag of string which I haven't used, but from the catalog it looks like it might be just right for a classroom. His website is [www.stringfigurestore.com](http://www.stringfigurestore.com).

The following list of books are great to read aloud to your children and follow up with the string figure version of the character featured in the book. Older students can learn the figures and share the books with younger classes.

### **Mosquito -**

*Why Mosquitos Buzz In People's Ears* by Verna Aardema. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Dial Books, 1973.

### **Fishing Spear -**

*Salmon Summer* by Bruce Mcmillan. Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

*Neeluk: An Eskimo Boy in the Days of the Whaling Ships* by Frances Kittredge. Illustrations by Howard Rock. Alaska Northwest Books, 2001. Read the story "Neeluk Goes Fishing."

### **Palm Tree -**

*The Match Between the Winds* by Shirley Climo. Illustrated by Roni Shepherd. Macmillan N.Y. 1991.

*Juan Bobo: Four Folktales From Puerto Rico* retold by Carmen T. Berneir-Grand. Illustrated by Ernest Ramos Nieves. Harper Collins, 1994. Find the palm tree in each story.

*Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault. Illustrated by Lois Ehlert. Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1999.

*The Wish Fish* by Jean Warren. Illustrated by Barb Tourtillotte. Warren Publishing, Wa. 1993.

### **Broom -**

*Bony Legs* by Joanna cole, Illustrated by Dirk Zimmer. Four Winds Press, Macmillian , N.Y., 1983.

*Tsugele's Broom* by Valerie Scho Carey. Illustrated by Dirk Zimmer. Harper Collins, N.Y., 1993.

### **Cat's Whiskers -**

*How The Manx Cat Lost Its Tail*. Retold and Illustrated by Janet Stevens. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, N.Y., 1990.