

## Art of the story aids literacy education

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Helen Wheelock tells an interactive story to incoming kindergarten students as teachers from around the state observe during the Next Generation Arts Academy at Model Laboratory Elementary School (Madison County).

Drama artist Helen Wheelock's use of voice animation, mixed with call and response and sprinkled with a touch of silliness, held her students' rapt attention as she read *Ruby in Her Own Time* in a Model Laboratory Elementary School (Madison County) classroom last week.

"Flap, flap, flap, fly," she said, elongating the final letter and raising it in pitch as she thrust her outstretched hand upward. "Let's all say that."

Dutifully, the students repeated every word, just as Wheelock had said them. She asked the students to fill in details in the story, like where did the little bird fly, and responded reassuringly to their answers.

After she finished, Wheelock told the students she got the story from a book. They couldn't wait to get their hands on it.

The audience was not elementary students but teachers – one of whom would later say Wheelock "had us eating out of the palm of her hand" – who were learning how to use storytelling and other art forms to develop early literacy skills in their students.

Since 2000, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and the [Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts](#) have held weeklong [Summer Arts Academies](#) for teachers to receive training in four art forms: music, dance, visual art and drama. This year, two Next Generation Academies ran concurrently: one for [integrating world languages with the arts](#) and a new one for integrating emergent and early literacy with the arts.

Twenty-two elementary school teachers signed up for the new academy, joining the 36 who attended the world language arts academy, which is in its second year. Most of the teachers went in pairs – a content-area teacher and an arts teacher, according to [Jeffrey Jamner](#), director of School Programs for the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts in Louisville and coordinator of the center's Summer Arts Academies for teachers.

Jamner said his goal is to keep the arts academies relevant to issues in education, and few issues are more relevant nationally and in Kentucky than early literacy.

Young children naturally learn by acting, playing, singing, exploring and engaging different parts of their brains, he said.

"Our goal is to tap into that power and apply it to reading," he said. "Integrating the arts is just plain good teaching, because it's how kids learn. Our goal

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is to make learning come alive in as many ways as we can, and in a child's world, that involves artistic, creative activities.”

Giving teachers more skills in different art forms gives them more strategies and more entry points for students, whether that is in early literacy or more traditional classroom subjects, Jamner said.

“We’ve been showing teachers how to lead activities that include drama, dance, visual arts and music when teaching social studies and world language,” he said. “With literacy, we’re doing the same thing – we’re really focusing within literacy on comprehension.”

Jasmine Rutherford, a 4th grade language arts and social studies teacher at Model Laboratory Elementary, also is a drama club sponsor. She said she using drama will become a greater part of her classroom after attending the academy.

If a child can communicate what they have read or heard, then they have comprehension, Rutherford said.

“Getting up and acting something out makes you really have to know what you’ve read and then you get to interpret it and make it your own,” she said.

**Robert Duncan**, state arts and humanities consultant, noted that literacy is about more than reading text. For instance, understanding what a visual artist was trying to express in a painting or a musician in a piece of music is literacy.

“How many times can we copy a Van Gogh painting and write a report about him?” he asked rhetorically. “This says nothing about artists and why they do what they do or what type of statement are they trying to make. That is another part of literacy – reading an artwork, making those inferences and learning how to communicate your viewpoints.”

Literacy also is about communicating your beliefs as well, Duncan said. Kentucky’s new English/language arts standards include [communication](#), he said.

While the academy largely approached literacy through storytelling, teachers also learned to use visual arts, dance and music.

“Throughout history, story has engaged children, and it’s been part of teaching – the oral tradition – and connecting that to text, but investing the children so that they care what happens in the story,” Duncan said.

“Based on nearly 20 years of experience in arts education and seeing how children really engage in learning and how teachers engage in that process, I believe very strongly that if we put the right experts together to see what we can do to better integrate arts education and literacy efforts with young children, great things can result,” he added.

If Kentucky wants graduates who are college- and career-ready, schools have to include the arts, Jamner said. An [IBM study](#) shows that creativity is the most highly prized attribute among international CEOs, he pointed out.

Duncan said numerous studies show the importance of arts education. For instance, UCLA education professor James Catterall did a recent [study](#) that found that students with strong backgrounds in the arts in high school have stronger community involvement.

The arts academies are built on research that shows that arts positively affect students at different age groups, Duncan said.

“We’ve got to find something early on that engages the students and encourages them to follow this,” he said.

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The path to dropping out of school can begin in kindergarten, Duncan said.

“If they’re entering school unprepared with reading and writing skills, then that can be one of the most difficult things to pick up on and get caught up on,” he said.

[Chanda Britt](#), a preschool teacher at Woodlawn Elementary (Boyle County), said she is not very knowledgeable about using the arts to teach, but she sees the ways they can be combined with literacy and other subjects to help children.

“This has been perfect, particularly for preschool-aged children, because I think so many people have an idea of kindergarten readiness that it’s just knowing your letters and sounds, and that’s not it,” she said. “I think more students struggle with reading in kindergarten who don’t have a broad vocabulary and who have limited experiences and problems with listening comprehension. I think reading problems stem more from those areas than just letters and sounds. So this academy is really addressing those areas that can help build up preschoolers’ previous knowledge that will help them in kindergarten.”

Britt said the interactive storytelling is a great way to engage students.

“Preschoolers like to be involved, they like to talk, and they like to move, so that will be perfect for story time in my room,” she said. “For preschool, if your kids aren’t engaged, you have chaos. Preschool teachers are the masters of engagement anyway. This gives us more tools to put in our toolbox.”

Librarian and drama teacher [Tina Dunn](#) and music teacher [Kim Black](#) teach together at Murray Elementary School (Murray Independent).

Dunn agreed that the interactive storytelling she has learned at the academy will better engage students.

“You will change kids,” she said. “They will love to come to your class. They will love stories, maybe being motivated to read a book.”

Black said she and Dunn, who have been to four arts academies, take back what they learn and teach it to traditional classroom teachers.

“I think the clinicians here have been really good to make it a very simple literature-art connection,” she said. We can go back and share with our teachers, and I think they’ll be comfortable trying those things.”

Black said literacy is really about communicating.

“All children want to communicate,” she said. “They may not all be able to communicate verbally, they may not all be able to communicate in every single way, but this is another way to communicate.”

### FOR MORE INFO...

[KDE’s Literacy page](#)

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