

# If Walls Could

*The Performance Cycle brings literacy and the arts together to give students a reason to learn.*

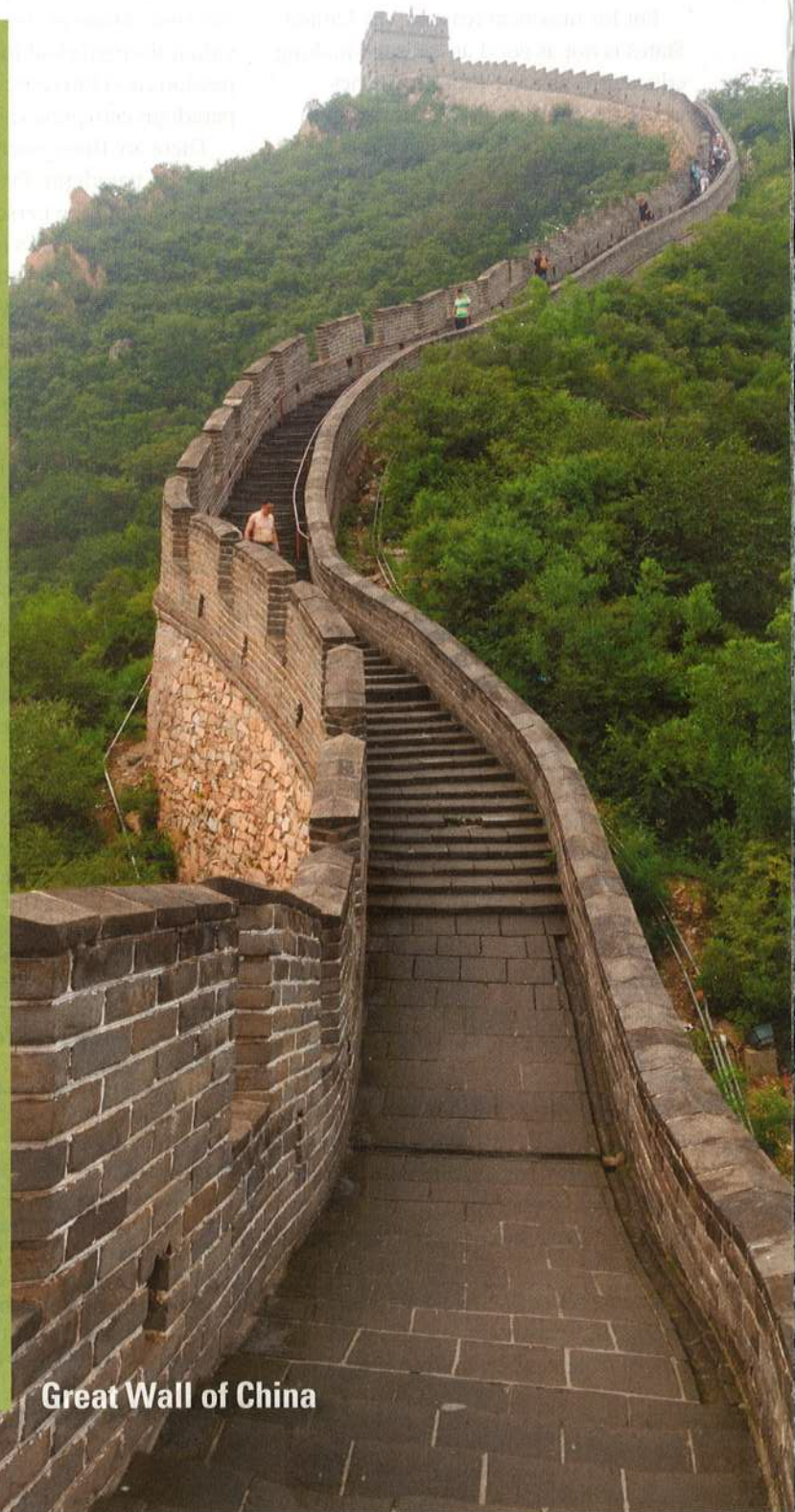
**Eileen Landay and Kurt Wootton**

**W**hen Len Newman sat down one August to plan his humanities classes for the year, he began by thinking carefully about the students he knew would be coming into his high school classroom.

What themes would they find compelling? What questions and academic challenges would resonate? What texts would be inspiring and informative and act as a springboard for their developing literacy skills?

Fresh in his mind was the professional development program he had completed the previous summer on the campus of Brown University at the ArtsLiteracy Project's lab school. There, each teacher had been paired with a professional artist. All eight teaching teams had designed and taught a monthlong course to youth from local high schools. All groups designed their courses around a common essential question, a common print text, and a curriculum framework called the Performance Cycle. The summer's text had been Sophocles' *Antigone*, challenging material for the Providence-area high school students who attended the program. Each teaching team wove together literacy activities and multiple art forms to bring the classic play alive.

Many of Newman's students at Central Falls High School in Central Falls, Rhode Island, were new immigrants with a wide range of reading and writing skills. In addition to teaching language and literacy skills, Newman and his teaching partner, Richard Kinslow, were to teach geography and history. Would the use of varied art forms and the Performance Cycle complicate an already demanding set of requirements? Newman had seen how the Performance Cycle could be adapted to students' needs



Great Wall of China

© OCHKIN ALEXEY/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

# Talk

and could bring classrooms to life; he believed it would work with his students.

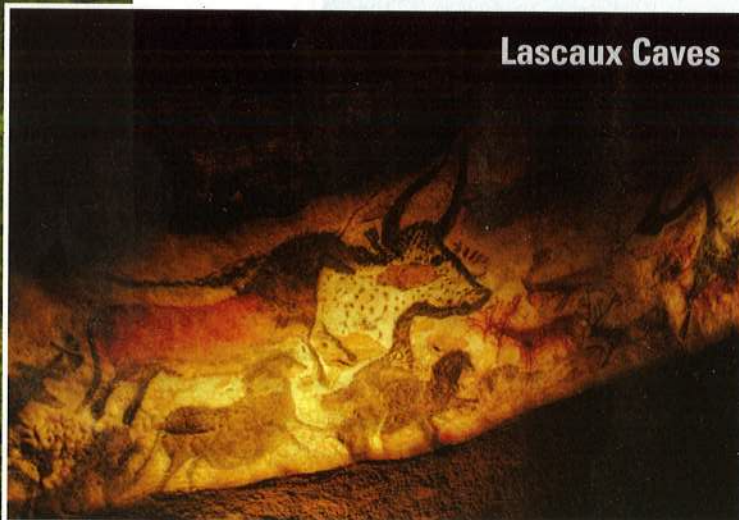
## The Big Idea

Newman's first task was to choose a big idea around which to center the year's work. He found inspiration in the book *Talking Walls* by Margy Burns Knight (Tilbury House, 2003). The book introduces readers to the history and customs of cultures around the world through paintings and stories about famous walls, including the Lascaux caves, Jerusalem's Wailing Wall, Diego Rivera's Mexican murals, and Nelson Mandela's prison cell on Robben Island. Newman and Kinslow planned to use these famous walls to teach geography and

see, what would they see? If the walls could hear, what would they hear? These questions, combined with the Performance Cycle, established a plan for the year that the teachers named "The Talking Walls of Central Falls." Newman and Kinslow built into that plan activities that would introduce students to many sorts of walls, both literal and metaphorical.

## The Performance Cycle

Developed over the past decade by teams of educators and teaching artists participating in Brown University's ArtsLiteracy Project, the Performance Cycle, depicted in an interactive illustration at <http://artslit.org/thehandbook.htm>, is a framework



Lascaux Caves

© LARRY DALE GORDON/GETTY IMAGES



Wailing Wall

© KOBRY DAGAN / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

history and to introduce their students to famous walls in literature. They would ask students to tell the stories of boundaries they crossed as they emigrated from their native land. And they'd use images of the walls all around them in Central Falls as a way of exploring the small city the students now called home.

Essential questions students could respond to in various art forms came quickly to mind: If the walls could talk, what would they say? If the walls could

for curriculum design that provides direction yet is easy to understand and adaptable to specific situations. In the most successful iterations of this work, community building and a final performance of understanding drive the learning process. In the time between initial community building and final performance, participants identify important questions and themes and work with high-quality print texts. At the center of all the work is reflection: Students reflect on texts they encounter and on their

own work as they create texts and shape them into a final product that combines elements of the core text with art forms of their own choosing.

### **Building Community**

Building and maintaining a positive and supportive classroom community were fundamental to Newman and Kinslow's implementation of the Performance Cycle. Every day, they stood outside their classroom door with smiles on their faces, greeting and shaking hands or exchanging high fives as the students entered. They introduced games and activities that gave students carefully structured ways to get to know one another, to practice oral and written language, and to establish a sense of purpose for their work.

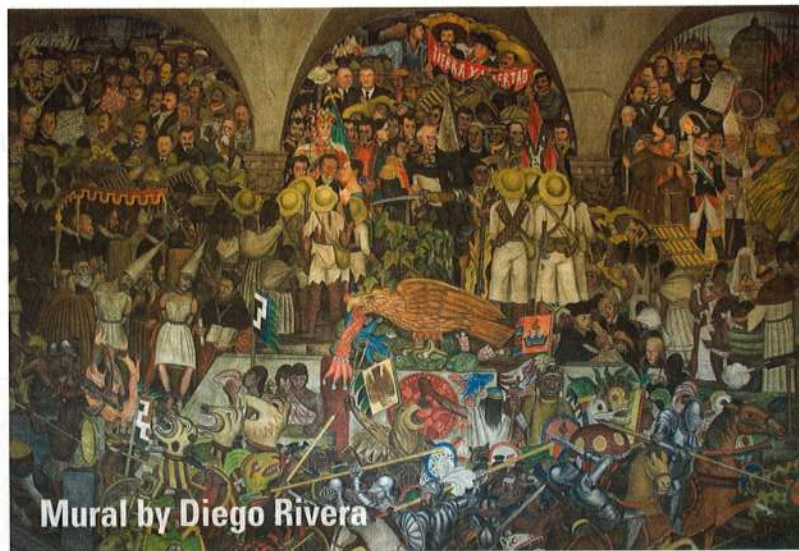
As an initial step in the Talking Walls project, the teachers asked the students to think of the ways walls can serve as barriers, boundaries, support, and protection. They then asked them to construct a friendship wall. Students began by listing people, places, and things that they loved. Because they were English language learners, students formed sentences using the supportive structure, "I love . . . because . . . ." They shared what they wrote with one another, telling stories of families and friends in Central Falls and those left behind in their home countries.

The teachers then asked students to choose one or two things from their individual lists and add them to the class's friendship wall. Artifacts included student writing, visual art, photographs, and concrete objects that represented friends and friendships. Not only were students learning about one another's lives, but they were also creating work

that they could later use in their performances and visual art.

### **Entering Text**

In a productive and purposeful learning environment, teachers inspire students to raise questions, explore topics, and ultimately, contribute something new to an existing body of knowledge. Activities for entering texts help students establish connections between their lives and new material. Teachers like Newman and Kinslow use these connec-



**Mural by Diego Rivera**

COLUMAN LEWNER GERARDO / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

tions to create reasons for students to read and write, especially when students have not yet had extensive positive interactions with text.

The teachers cultivated student engagement and commitment to entering texts by introducing intriguing and relevant problems, such as the wall project's guiding questions. (If the walls could see, what would they see? If the walls could hear, what would they hear?) Working in pairs or small groups, students translated and interpreted manageable numbers of words, phrases, or short paragraphs related to these questions. Although these activities provided opportunities for students to explore sound-symbol relationships, their main objective was to inspire students to *want* to read.

Newman and Kinslow introduced students to famous walls of the world by showing them pictures in *Talking Walls*. Together, they read the book's brief vignettes, each one telling the story of a young person's encounter with a wall. Students located the walls on world maps. They discussed the walls they had encountered in the course of their emigration. Together, they took a walking tour of their new community and completed a scavenger hunt in which they identified the town's institu-

tions and buildings. Finally, they discussed how they could create and present a public performance that demonstrated the ways walls talk. The walls metaphor, their yearlong theme, created coherence across content areas and invited students to connect their lives to the wider world.

### **Comprehending Text**

Once students establish purposes for reading, they are more prepared

to engage deeply with print. But to comprehend extended text, they must be able to decode the written symbols on the page fluently and automatically and have a sufficient amount of word knowledge to construct meaning. Further, they must be able to maintain focus and stamina.

Over the course of the year, with the content of *Talking Walls* as a foundation, students discussed, read, and wrote deeply on numerous subjects. Their teachers introduced them to the lives of Diego Rivera and Nelson Mandela and to the stories of the Berlin Wall and the Holocaust Museum. With walls as the guiding metaphor, they read fiction and poetry, including Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," O. Henry's "The Last Leaf," Robert Frost's "Mending

Wall,” Ovid’s “Pyramus and Thisbe,” and sections of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*.

Students read aloud with partners or in small groups, silently to themselves, or chorally. They prepared small segments of text to read and discuss aloud, a process that helped them slow down, focus, and read carefully and analytically. Such purposeful and repeated engagement with text helped students increase their focus and stamina and embrace reading strategies, such as predicting, questioning, inferring, and visualizing. However, what motivated the students was not the opportunity to practice strategies, but the chance to engage in genuine acts of comprehension related to the guiding questions that held their interest and were intrinsically satisfying.

### **Creating Text**

Throughout the project, students responded to the guiding questions with their own interpretations and personal responses. Teachers emphasized reading and writing but invited students to move back and forth among different artistic mediums—storytelling, writing, dance, and visual art. Through the Talking Walls project, students advanced their language skills and their understanding of both geography and history. Students also had the opportunity to create something new by sharing their personal stories and their vision of the world around them.

For example, in the “Walls of the World” segment of the project, students researched a country that contained a famous wall: the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, the Wailing Wall, or the Palacio Nacional murals of Diego Rivera. In a companion project, they studied the “Walls of Central Falls.” They toured their community, observing and making careful notes following an outline from their teachers. Then they used maps and census data to learn the demographics of the town. Next, they created charts, graphs, and written reports, as well

as individual music, art, theater, or spoken-word projects to represent what they’d learned.

Finally, in the “Walls of My World” segment, they crafted autobiographical accounts of their lives. One group of students created a series of three-part murals depicting memories of their country of origin, their experience of arriving in the United States, and their vision of the future. Others made videos or took still photographs of their town and school. And others choreographed dances or created raps. Together, these compositions formed the backbone of the performance students would give at the end of the semester.

## **The walls metaphor, their yearlong theme, created coherence across content areas and invited students to connect their lives to the wider world.**

### **Revising and Rehearsing**

Students knew that they’d be giving a public performance on the walls project at the end of the year. They also knew that several pieces of their writing would be published in a class book that would be widely circulated and catalogued into the school library. So throughout the year, students reviewed their work on their own or with peers or adults. Engaging in this purposeful repetition, they weren’t working for a grade but to create the best possible product.

After students developed drafts of their writing, art, music, and theater performances, their teachers encouraged them to revise their work to a point of excellence. They asked students what they thought excellent work looked like and how they could improve their work. Through these discussions, the class developed a vocabulary, or rubric, for each piece of work. Conversations

about theatrical performances, for example, addressed what it meant to “commit” to the actions on the stage and how to begin and end every piece with “crisp entrances and exits.” The students were learning, to use educator Ron Berger’s term,<sup>1</sup> “an ethic of excellence,” one that was rooted in the students’ desire to get it right by the day of the performance.

### **Performing Text**

When students create a performance, they have opportunities to use their reading, writing, and critical-thinking skills. Performance provides a concrete goal for everyone to work toward, and

the prospect of presenting one’s work to an authentic audience encourages high-quality work. The very event of the performance also solidifies relationships within the learning community and establishes motives for future community efforts and endeavors.

All year, Newman and Kinslow’s students completed many kinds of assignments. They learned to “speak” in a range of art forms or literacies. At the end of the year, students presented “The Talking Walls of Central Falls” to an audience of friends, family, teachers, and community members.

As videos and still photographs were projected behind them, student after student told their stories using a variety of art forms. Some, like Omar Nuñez, stepped up to the microphone to tell an immigration story: “I was very nervous because I was leaving my family, and because I was coming to

the United States. But, I was happy too, because I knew that I would be seeing my father and mother again after eight years.” One group presented a series of tableaux—or frozen images. Others rapped. Some danced. The students’ murals hung on the walls of the auditorium and remained there throughout the following year.

Looking back some time later, Len Newman said,

There is nothing quite like that cathartic moment when the cast is taking bows and the audience is shouting. For many of our students, this work is the pinnacle of their high school experience. For me to participate is, as always, a privilege. When I do this work, I feel like I’m painting.

### **Reflecting**

Central to the entire Performance Cycle is reflection, the “thinking-about-thinking” process that helps all learners evaluate and increase the quality of

their participation and performance. In Newman and Kinslow’s class, debriefing discussions occurred frequently at the end of an activity, a class, or a rehearsal. These discussions highlighted successes and areas for improvement and revealed much about what participants had learned about both the content and the process of preparing and presenting their work. Students’ reflections on the texts they read and comprehended and on the texts they created and revised clarified and enriched the work they did throughout the year.

### **Walls That Talk**

As students enter our classrooms having crossed borders and boundaries both tangible and metaphorical, we must meet them with educational spaces that offer rigorous literacy instruction and welcome divergent ways of thinking and communicating. Working with the Arts-

Literacy Performance Cycle, Newman, Kinslow, and their students provided a vision of such a classroom. In this Central Falls classroom, the walls *did* talk—and we listened. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>Berger, R. (2003). *An ethic of excellence: Building a culture of craftsmanship with students*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

*Authors’ note:* Many of the activities teachers used in “The Talking Walls of Central Falls” are described in the handbook on the ArtsLiteracy website ([www.artslit.org](http://www.artslit.org)) and in the book *A Reason to Read: Linking Literacy and the Arts* (Harvard Education Press, 2012). Student names are pseudonyms.

---

**Eileen Landay** (Eileen\_Landay@Brown.edu) and **Kurt Wootton** (Kurt@artslit.org) are the founders of the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University ([www.artslit.org](http://www.artslit.org)) and the authors of *A Reason to Read: Linking Literacy and the Arts* (Harvard Education Press, 2012).