

# The Travels of **Travers**

## *Using Theme/Journal Books in Your Classroom*

**BY CAROLYN SCHELLER**

**H**ave you been looking for a novel way to make your social studies or science lessons sparkle? Would you like to create a theme that your students would get excited about? Wouldn't it be great if you could inspire them to write or create a journal? A stuffed animal classroom mascot will stimulate ideas and help students focus on a theme for the entire school year. You can use the mascot to collaborate with your students in creating a book or journal.

### **Theme/Journal Book**

To create a unit theme/journal book, you will need a main character to tie the chapters or entries together. How about a study of the land forms of your country, state, or local area? You could choose a stuffed turtle that travels to many places and appears in photographs of different land forms. Be sure to give the journal a catchy title: "Travers Traverses Our Land" or "Travers Goes Over Hill and Over Dale."

You can take the photos yourself, assign several students, or ask parents or church members to photograph the mascot on their trips. Suggest types of terrain where they might take the photographs. Then organize the photographs and place them in a book. Write about the land form in the journal. Your students can add to it by taking the stuffed animal to other sites and writing about their experiences.

These journals can be used to spark student interest in social studies or science topics. I have been creating theme/journal books

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with my kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd graders for several years. They look forward with eager anticipation to the beginning of each year, hoping to find a new mascot in their classroom.

All my students enjoy writing in the theme/journal books. Even the youngest children can participate because drawing pictures is a component of creative writing. I have been amazed at the growth and progress each one has made.

*Travers Goes Over Hill and Over Dale* was a book I created one summer on a drive across the United States from California to Delaware. Since I wanted to introduce the many and varied land forms of the United States in class that fall, I photographed the turtle while traveling across the country. I kept a record of the locations where each photo was taken and collected bits of information

along the way. It was a fun project that kept me alert for interesting places and different kinds of land forms.

After the photographs were developed, I organized them, choosing the ones that best depicted different land forms. I placed them in a bound composition book and wrote several short paragraphs for each picture. I used this book as an introduction to a geography and map skills unit early in the school year. Throughout the year, I scheduled activities and referred back to the book often. Units about animal communities, natural resources, or a particular region presented great opportunities to reread our book.

During the school year, the children wrote about their own experiences with Travers. Each week, a different student took the stuffed turtle home on

Thursday and brought him back on Monday. They introduced their parents to Travers and his journal and worked together on new entries for the book. Some drew pictures of what they had done. Others dictated a story to a parent, who then transcribed it. The older students wrote their own journal entries. Everyone was excited about having his or her page read to the class during story time!

Travers also played many roles in the classroom. Each day, one child got to hold the stuffed turtle during rest and story time. We also took Travers with us on field trips. After we returned, we would write a story about the trip and enter it into the journal. This provided excellent opportunities for students to develop their writing skills.

Theme/journal books can cover a single event or a series of activities. A topic such as bees or the zoo can be photographed all at one time to illustrate a story. Or the book can be divided into chapters, allowing students to create their own stories.

Older students can collaborate to write one theme/journal book, using a stuffed mascot to tie the chapters together. To get them started, provide a sample chapter, after which each student can add photographs or drawings and write his or her own section.

### **Involve Other People, Too**

A theme/journal project offers a perfect opportunity to involve parents and church members with your class. Put an announcement in the school newsletter and local church bulletins asking for volunteers to take a mascot on tour. In most communities, there are business persons or church executives who do a good deal of traveling, or immigrants who occasionally return to their homelands. Many of

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**The author of this article with several of her students and their latest mascot.**

these people would be willing to carry along a small stuffed animal to photograph in various locations.

Supply a small tape recorder or notebook so they can record their impressions, and a tote bag for the mascot and any materials they collect on their travels. In your directions, suggest that they collect postcards and brochures that tell about the locations where the photos were taken. Upon their return, you can transcribe their notes and create a narrative to accompany the photos. If the traveler creates the booklet for the theme/journal book, remind him or her to use simple language and short sentences if it is intended for primary-grade students.

Your school may even want to have several mascots traveling at once!

### **Integrating Imagination and the Real World = Learning**

Children love immersing themselves in the world of imagination and discovery. And they enjoy discovering the real world around them. Combining the two worlds provides opportunities for many creative activities. Theme/journal books using a stuffed animal provide many opportunities to integrate various learning skills and subject matters.

Teachers can make school fun and interesting by teaching about the real world in creative ways. God made us creative, and children need to learn to use the imagination in healthy ways. Theme/journal books create high interest for young children. The subject matter becomes more tangible for children when accompanied with real objects or pictures. Far-off places or new science topics become more interesting and real to children when they can feel and touch objects that are linked with the material.

Theme/journal books are not fictional stories. Children are very aware of who created the book and that the stuffed animal actually traveled with the author. The fact that the stuffed toy in their hands was photographed in special places or situations helps them visualize new concepts in fun ways. Places and ideas that are still in the "imaginary" or "vicarious" stage can become more real to young children through books and pictures.

### **Creating a Theme/Journal Book**

Select a theme or unit of study and an animal related to it. Then create a catchy name for the character. Here are some ideas:

- Land forms of the world    turtle    "Travers"
- Canada, Alaska, maps    moose    "Max"

• Australia	baby kangaroo	“Joey”
	koala	“Matilda”
• Thailand	gibbon	“Ling” (Thai for monkey)
• Amazon	snake	“Anna”
• Africa	gorilla	“Koko”
• India	tiger	“Bengal”
• State of Tennessee	frog	“Tennessee Ernie Frog”
• Delaware historical spots	ladybug	“Lady Della”
• California gold country	bear	“Sierra Nevada”
• Deserts, Palm Springs (California)	rabbit	“San Jacinto” (name of local mountain)
		“Sandy, the Desert Hare”
• Volcanoes, Mt. Rainier (Washington state)	bear	“Rainier Growly Bear”
• Insects	bee, butterfly	“Buzz,” “Flutterby”
• Sugars (bees and maple trees)	bee and bear	“Blossom Honey,” “Maple Sugar,” and “Sweet Clover”
• Friends	bear	“Beau Bear”

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In selecting a theme, think of where you or your friends might travel during a vacation. Or choose an interesting topic such as sugar. One year, my students talked a lot about sugar. Lunch-time conversations often centered on the sugar content of their juice and other food containers! They were already very “health conscious,” even at this young age.

The following summer, I decided to create a unit on sugar. While visiting a friend who kept bees, I took along a stuffed bear and two stuffed bees. I photographed them next to the beekeeper as he took his hives apart and told me about beekeeping. Afterward, I wrote the book *Sweet Clover, Blossom Honey, and Maple Sugar*.

During the next school year, my class took field trips to study trees. In the autumn, we visited a nature center and searched for maple trees by looking for their leaves on the forest floor. In the early spring, we went back to see how the trees were tapped and the sap collected for maple syrup.

During that year, we also studied about good foods. We collected many different kinds of sugars and had a tasting activity. We tried maple sugar, molasses, sugar cane, cane sugar, brown sugar, white sugar, corn syrup, and honey. We talked about palm sugar, rice sugar, sugar beets, and many other kinds of sugar. We learned about the body’s need for sugar and what happens when it gets too much sugar. Even parents became interested in our study and developed a heightened health consciousness about school lunches.

Numerous other activities were also generated by our theme/journal book. For example, learning about honey led to a unit about bees.

### How to Get Started

After choosing the topic and selecting a stuffed animal charac-

ter, photograph it in settings with your subject as background. Older students can not only write and illustrate entries for the book, but they can also take the photos. Provide them with a camera and directions for exploring their subject and photographing it with the stuffed animal. They can also collect postcards, brochures, and books to add to the journal or to be used for study materials.

There are many ways to collect illustrations and material. For example:

- On vacation, photograph the animal everywhere you go on excursions.
- At historical spots, photograph the animal in the foreground of the locations.
- At a farm, photograph the stuffed animal in different places that depict farm life.
- At a post office or fire station, photograph the animal as you tour the building.

Photographing a stuffed mascot can be quite a bit of fun. Be prepared to answer a lot of questions from people who observe your work!

Take notes on the locations and activities, which you can expand later for the theme/journal book. After having the photos developed, place them in sequence. Use a photo on every page of the book. (This is especially important for young children.) The more pictures, the better the concepts will be communicated.

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roduction to the stuffed animal, i.e., "Hello. I'm Sierra Nevada. I am from Camino, California, a logging town in the mountains on US Highway 50." [My students were very familiar with Highway 50 since our school was on its eastern end. This made for an interesting discussion of where roads go!]

- Follow the photo sequence, including details of what you want your class to learn or think about. Use language suitable for the grade level of your students.

- Include an "About the Author" page at the end of your story. Insert a picture of yourself with the stuffed animal, and tell about yourself. This will help new students and parents to become acquainted with you.

- Write a page of "Instructions to Parents." This will help them know how to use the book if you plan to have students add their experiences with the mascot when they take it home. Or you may write a page of "Instructions to Students" if they are to be responsible for adding entries to the journal.

### Using Your Mascot and Theme/Journal Book

Now your theme/journal book is ready to present to the class.

Provide some kind of tote bag for the theme/journal book and other materials you have gathered for the children to take home or to study. It should be large enough to carry the stuffed animal, too, so that it can travel safely between school and home. A related storybook for the parents to read to the child, a coloring book, maps, activity books, and travel brochures may be added for them to enjoy.

Include a "Letter to Parents" giving instructions on how to help their child care for and enjoy the stuffed animal and contents of the bag. Write directions for adding entries

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### Writing the Theme/Journal Book

Last, write the theme/journal book. Here are some important instructions and tips to follow in creating an attractive, informative, and sturdy journal:

- Choose a sturdy composition notebook with wide lines and a permanent, sewn binding.

- Create a cover. Place a photograph, the title, and author/illustrator's name on it.

- Write a title page.

Place the title and author/illustrator's name on the first page of the book. A "publisher's name" can be created and added to the bottom of the page. The publisher can be either the students or the creator of the theme/journal book. This is an excellent time to discuss the parts of a book such as title page, copyright notice, and chapter titles.

- Add a "copyright" page. Include the date and "publisher's name" on the second page.

- A "dedication" or "introduction" page may be included. Your students will be pleased to see their names included in a dedication page—and so will their parents.

- Insert the photographs as you write. Use double-sided cellophane tape or rubber cement to mount the photos.

- Write the story line. Begin with an in-

to the journal. Laminate this letter or place it in a sealed plastic bag so it will last the whole school year.

Choose a special time early in the school year to introduce the class mascot and theme/journal book. Gather your students around close to you. Tell about the mascot, its name, where it came from, and how it will be used in your class. If appropriate, show a map and trace its journey. Read the theme/journal book together and show the pictures. Tell the children how they will add to the book.

Take the stuffed animal on class field trips and write group stories with your students to be transcribed and added to the book. Add pictures of the trip to the story. Make the mascot a special feature of your classroom all year.

One year Andy, a kindergarten student of mine, moved away to another school. I made arrangements with his new teacher to feature Sierra Nevada bear in her classroom for her students to add to the journal that Andy and his classmates had worked on the previous year. This was kept a secret until a big box arrived in his classroom. Our class had gone to the post office on a field trip and mailed Sierra Nevada. When the box was opened, it took Andy a few moments before he recognized the mascot. Then he burst out, "That's Sierra Nevada! HE'S MY BEAR!" What a story he had to tell his classmates about Sierra Nevada and his friends from his

**Tennessee Ernie Frog visits the Lost Sea in Sweetwater, Tennessee.**

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**Travers the Turtle surveys land forms from Buckeye Creek bridge in California.**

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former school. His mother told me later it was one of the highlights of his 1st-grade year.

It was a wonderful experience for my class as well as we looked forward to Sierra Nevada's return to our classroom. It was gratifying to see past friendships remembered. Everyone was excited to learn how far the bear had traveled and to read the entries from Andy's new classmates.

After I presented this project at the 2000 North American Division Teachers Convention in Dallas, Texas, a home-school mother asked if my class would be willing to participate in a project with her children. She wanted an opportunity for her daughters to communicate with other children. Her girls created a book about their state with "Max the Moose" as their mascot. Max

and the journal journeyed to several places in Canada and the United States. When Max arrived at our school, we read his journal and watched a video about Canada another class had added to his collection.

We created a unit about the wetlands and flyways on the Eastern Shore of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. We took some field trips, photographed our area, wrote some group stories, and entered them in the journal. In Max's box, we added a book about the Eastern Shore.

Then Max was returned to the home-schoolers by the U.S. Postal Service.

When Max arrived back home, the girls scanned the journal entries onto his own Web site so anyone could enjoy his travels on the Internet!

By creating a theme/journal book, you can create a memorable experience for your class and enhance learning. ☺

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Michigan. This article is based on a seminar presentation she made at the 2000 North American Division Teachers Convention in Dallas, Texas.

**The author and her K-2 students accompany Beau Bear and Sierra Nevada Bear on a field trip to the fire station.**