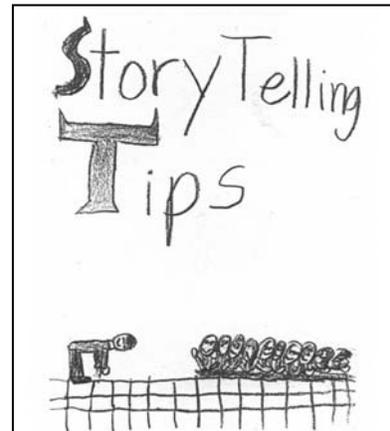


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1 The Power of Storytelling in the Classroom



AN ANCIENT TOOL WITH ENDURING POWER

Storytelling is the oldest form of education. People around the world have always told tales as a way of passing down their cultural beliefs, traditions, and history to future generations. Why? Stories are at the core of all that makes us human. As Barbara Hardy wrote, “We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative” (1978, 13).

We all have a story to tell and a drive to tell it. Robert Coles describes *story* as “everyone’s rock-bottom capacity” (1989, 30). And Vivian Gussin Paley’s work with young children confirms that the need and the ability to tell stories are innate:

Amazingly, children are born knowing how to put every thought and feeling into story form. If they worry about being lost, they become the parents who search . . . Even happiness has its plot and characters: “Pretend I’m the baby and you only love me and you don’t talk on the telephone” (1990, 4).

Stories are the way we store information in the brain. If teachers fill their students' brains with miscellaneous facts and data without any connection, the brain becomes like a catchall closet into which items are tossed and hopelessly lost. But stories help us to organize and remember information, and tie content together (Caine and Caine 1994, 121–122; Egan 1992, 11).

Stories go straight to the heart. As the Irish poet and philosopher James Stephens wrote, “The head does not hear anything until the heart has listened. The heart knows today what the head will understand tomorrow” (1929, 128). Because class members and teachers are emotionally involved with and usually enjoy storytelling, it can help students develop a positive attitude toward the learning process. It also produces a sense of joy in language and words that is so often missing in the classroom setting.

Research backs up the idea that “even students with low motivation and weak academic skills are more likely to listen, read, write, and work hard in the context of storytelling” (U.S. Department of Education, 1986, 23). Any point that is made in a telling or any teaching that is done afterward is likely to be much more effective. Sixth grade teacher Sharon Gibson says:

Many teachers think that storytelling will take away from class time, but it doesn't. Storytelling is part of your lesson, and makes the actual lesson much more powerful. By about the third time that I start my sixth grade class by saying “I'm going to tell you a story,” they'll settle down and listen—and I've got their attention for the whole period, long after the story ends. Even not particularly dedicated students will remember the stories and at the end of the year they are still referring to them (1990).

Storying, the process of constructing stories in the mind, is one of the most fundamental ways of making meaning and thus pervades all aspects of learning, regardless of age. Gordon Wells notes that young children find it easier to assimilate new ideas when they are presented in the form of a story and that even older students look to anecdotes to help them understand new concepts and link them to their lives (1986, 206).

Kieran Egan (1992), a respected scholar and author on teaching as it relates to storytelling, suggests that lessons and/or entire curriculum units can be shaped according to the engaging power of the story form. He writes:

Thinking of teaching as storytelling . . . encourages us to think of the curriculum as a collection of the great stories of our culture. If we begin to think in these terms, instead of seeing the curriculum as a huge mass of material to be conveyed to students, we can begin to think of teachers in our society as connected with an ancient and honored role. Teachers are the tellers of our culture's tales (1986, 459).



Students' eager hands demonstrate how excitement about learning is easy to arouse when subjects are presented within the context of storytelling.

Above all else, stories are perhaps the best presents teachers can give their students, for stories are beyond the power of money to buy or the world to take away. Stories belong to the students forever—from the first listening. As far as we are concerned, there need be no other reason for sharing stories in the classroom. Even better, the educational benefits are many.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STORYTELLING AND STORY READING

We are fervent advocates of reading aloud, realizing that, because it takes time to learn a story to tell, many of the stories that teachers share are read

aloud. Students still benefit from listening to a story read aloud, but storytelling *is* different and holds rewards that reading aloud does not. These benefits are explored in the coming pages.

The Hush

The quality of listening on the part of your students is markedly different when you tell a story directly to them. Stillness descends over the listeners. Technology has not replaced the power of one person telling a story to another. Listeners are often described as “mesmerized,” “totally enthralled,” or “captivated.” There is some evidence that listeners who willingly respond to a very powerful story might actually be in “a light trance state” (Martin 1993; Stallings 1988; Sturm 1999). In *Touch Magic*, Jane Yolen calls it “the centrifugal force of the spinning story.” She describes how she remembers, as a child, sitting in a group of children and adults listening to a storyteller recount the history of the Greek hero Perseus:

And when the storyteller came to the part where the hero held up the head of the gorgon Medusa, she held her own hand aloft. I could have sworn then—as I can swear now—that I saw snakes from the gorgon’s head curling and uncurling around the storyteller’s arm. At that moment I and all the other listeners around me were unable to move. It was as if we, and not Medusa’s intended victims, had been turned to stone (2000, 37).



The rapt, absorbed looks on the faces of listeners make obvious the power of the told story.

Flexibility

Storytelling is interactive. The teller sees the audience's reactions clearly and can adapt the story. If she sees fear in the eyes of younger students, she might tone the story down a bit. On the other hand, if a teller sees that his older students love the scary parts, he can accentuate them. We found that even our three-year-old niece understands this concept. One night when she and Martha were playing, Bailey wanted to be the mom and have Martha play the baby. Here's how the conversation went:

Bailey: It's time for you to go to bed, Baby. Let me tuck you in.

Martha: Oh Mommy, do I have to go to bed already?

Bailey: Yes, Baby. You are too tired. You need to rest.

Martha: Tell me a story, Mommy.

Bailey: Okay, Baby. Once upon a time there was a really big, hairy monster [said in very scary tone].

Martha: I'm scared, Mommy! I'm scared.

Bailey [very quickly]: It was a good monster! Don't worry, Baby. It was purple and it wasn't scary at all.

Because *telling* a story sets a teller free from the printed text, each telling is unique. Even the same story told by the same teller can be different every time.

Creating a Strong Connection

If you put the book away now and then and just tell the story, an enduring bond forms between you and your students. Without the book as a barrier, the teller looks directly into the eyes of the audience and is free to use gestures, facial expression, and body movements to enhance the telling and to help listeners understand the story better. Storytellers don't hide behind characters the way actors do; they reveal a great deal about themselves by the stories they tell and how they tell them. And while those who read aloud can see the audience only through a layer of words on the page, storytellers are richly rewarded by seeing the wonder and excitement on the faces of the listeners.

Because audience members are actively involved in the process, storytelling becomes a shared experience. Thus it brings a sense of intimacy and community. An extraordinary connection is made between the teller and the listener. We are no longer surprised when we later meet a student who had been in one of our large audiences and who says, "Remember me? You told me stories." If you read the letter we received from a fourth grader on page 6, you will see that, although we do not know the student, he feels a strong connection to us from having heard us tell stories.

Dear Beauty and the Beast,

I am so glad we had you over to our school. Thank you for coming such a long way to tell us stories. My favorite thing about both of you is the heart and love you put in your stories. Can you tell me how you go on stage with so much enthusiasm? Your actions were so great. I wanted to hear more and picture more. You guys are so good because you make so much energy in your stories that it makes people and children happy. Those stories were jumpy, scary, and funny all at the same time. When you did that scratchy sound and said tail-e-poe it made me get the shivers all over. I told my mom and dad all the stories and they were laughing. Will you come back before school is over this year? Please come back I would really like to hear more stories and see you again and you could come meet my mom and dad. My dad likes to make up stories and do voices. I'm sure you can get a lot of stories from him. I'll bet he likes story tellers and I know he'll like you and maybe you can stay with us for a change. I will ask my dad what our e-mail address is.

Sincerely,

Dylan Booth

Engaging Reluctant Learners

At times storytelling works when reading aloud doesn't. Tim Jennings, who was once a classroom teacher, says he became a storyteller to survive. He described his experience of teaching a group of extremely troubled ten- to sixteen-year-olds how to read. He loved to read aloud and thought that was a natural starting place, but he soon found that all the students felt that being read to was demeaning. One day he gathered up the courage to tell a story that he knew by heart. The students were very taken by it, and he later realized one important reason:

I had told a story rather than read one. My kids hated to read aloud so much that they didn't believe it could be something anybody would really want to do. When I read aloud with an appearance of relish, they automatically assumed I was faking, a practice as despicable to them as it was familiar. But they did like to talk and joke and so could accept my enthusiasm for telling a tale that was, to me at least, genuinely worthwhile (1981, 50).

Although many steps were involved in teaching his students to read, they were now motivated to do so and that made all the difference. One day at the end of the school year Jennings suddenly realized that they had just sat for two and a half hours reading from Tolkien's *The Hobbit!*

AN AUTHENTIC ACTIVITY THAT MOTIVATES STUDENTS

Storytelling is motivating. Students recognize it to be an authentic activity and a skill that is well worth acquiring. We have found this to be true whether students are listening to or telling world tales, works by other authors, or their own stories. Sonia Nieto, author of a number of books on multicultural education, says they have "the light in their eyes" that happens when students get excited about learning. She writes:

There is nothing as dazzling as this sight. Once we have seen the look of discovery and learning in students' eyes, we can no longer maintain that some young people—because of their social class, race, ethnicity, gender, native language, or other difference—are simply unmotivated, ignorant, or undeserving. The light in their eyes is eloquent testimony to their capacity and hence their right to learn, and it equips educators with the evidence and courage they need to defy the claim that some students are more entitled than others to the benefits of education (1999, xix).

Researcher Brian Cambourne has puzzled over the fact that some "normal" children fail to learn to read and write after going through years of schooling and are then labeled "deficient." He was especially disturbed when he

studied these same children and found they did not show any deficits “when it came to understanding and mastering the skills, tactics, and knowledge of complex sports like cricket, or sight reading music, or running a successful after-school lawn-mowing business . . . ” (1995, 183). Cambourne wondered if the “deficiency” might lie in the way children are taught to read and write. Since most children are fluent oral language users by the time they enter kindergarten, and since learning to talk is a “stunning intellectual achievement of incredible complexity” (1995, 183), he decided to study the conditions under which children learn oral language before they enter school. Based on his research, he proposed a model of learning that could be applied to literacy. Cambourne emphasizes that children do not truly engage in an activity unless they think it will “further the purposes of their lives” (1988, 35).

Another Kind of Literacy Experience

Teachers need to provide many different kinds of literacy experiences to meet individual needs. Every time we teach storytelling to a classroom of students, the teacher inevitably points out that some of the children who struggle with reading and writing are among the best storytellers in the class. In our early years of teaching storytelling, we were lucky enough to work with the same children three years in a row as third, fourth, and fifth graders. At one of the schools a boy named Anthony stood out each year because he was so funny and creative. One day, we said to his fifth grade teacher, “Wow! Isn’t Anthony extraordinary? Every year he amazes us by the way he tells his story.” She replied, “He’s incredible! But do you realize that he’s severely learning disabled? Although he’s quite smart, he struggles in reading and writing.” We would never have guessed. This incident made us more acutely aware of the fact that we all learn in different ways. Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (1993) emphasizes the idea that children learn at their own rate and in their own style. It was through storytelling that Anthony was able to demonstrate his language skills.

Creativity and Problem Solving

If students are encouraged to choose a folktale and, in keeping with the oral tradition, make it their own in the retelling, they learn to be creative and to think on their feet. Harold Rosen emphasizes how important it is for teachers not to simply ask students to memorize and transcribe:

. . . All that is quite different from retelling, from the ways in which we at one and the same time repeat the words and stories of others and also transform them. We elaborate, compress, innovate, and discard, take shocking liberties, delicately shift nuances . . . (1986, 235).

Students can then build on their adaptive skills by writing and telling their own stories. This creativity inevitably carries over into their other work. Students also learn that they have a unique sensibility and method of presentation and that no two people ever tell a story in the same way. And many learn in ways you never imagined, as storyteller Michael Parent observed:

I was teaching high-school English. Clarence, my favorite “reluctant learner” and class comedian, badly needed to make up credits to pass Junior English. He was given various options and chose to do dramatic readings of Aesop’s Fables. He worked hard, did very well, and the positive response seemed to boost him into more involvement with other assignments. He passed the course and became a senior. The next year, a fellow teacher told me that Clarence had begun to illustrate his point of view in class discussions with riveting stories about such non-comedic subjects as the sufferings of his slave ancestors. He was still a funny guy, but he was now being paid attention to even when he chose to be serious. The story reading and telling seemed to have carried him across that thin line between class clown and class philosopher (2005).

IMAGINATION AND VISUALIZATION

Scientist Albert Einstein said that “imagination is more important than knowledge.” Yet too often this essential part of education is ignored at home and in school. Imagination helps us to solve problems, to get beyond “right” and “wrong” answers; it helps us think outside the box. Kieran Egan describes imagination as:

. . . a particular kind of flexibility, energy, and vividness that comes from the ability to think of the possible and not just the actual . . . To be imaginative, then, is not to have a particular function highly developed, but it is to have heightened capacity in all mental functions . . . It makes all mental life more meaningful; it makes life more abundant (1992, 65).

Using one’s imagination means creating images in the mind. Literacy educators have recognized the crucial role of visualizing in reading and have begun to teach this skill to students. In *Mosaic of Thought*, Keene and Zimmermann talk of how so many students read passively, just the way they watch television (1997, 36). Students who are conditioned to pay attention only to the literal interpretation of text and the surface structure aspect of language, such as sounding out words, will remain disengaged. But when students create pictures in their minds while reading, their level



An expressively told story grabs the attention of listeners and brings vivid images to mind.

of engagement increases because the book becomes more personalized (Harvey and Goudvis 2000). Keene and Zimmermann write:

Proficient readers spontaneously and purposefully create mental images while and after they read. The images emerge from all five senses, as well as the emotions, and are anchored in a reader's prior knowledge. Proficient readers use images to immerse themselves in rich detail as they read. The detail gives depth and dimension to the reading, engaging the reader more deeply, making the text more memorable. Proficient readers use images to draw conclusions, to create distinct and unique interpretations of the text, to recall details significant to the text, and to recall a text after it has been read. Images from reading frequently become part of the reader's writing. Images from a reader's personal experience frequently become part of his or her comprehension (1997, 141).

Unfortunately, in our society it is difficult for children to trust the validity of their own images. Everywhere they look they are bombarded with the images of others: on television, at the movies, even in picture books. For example, many of them never heard the story of Snow White or Fa Mulan before seeing the Walt Disney movies and thus never had a chance to form their own images. It's difficult to shake a movie image once it has been seen. Even if children hear the stories again and again after seeing the movies, the Disney images will most likely exist forever in their minds.

The immense power that the visual media wields over children's imaginations has been made clear to us by an imagery exercise that we often lead during workshops. We ask students to describe a character from a story we just told.¹ There is always a great variety of descriptions. After pointing out how different the descriptions are, we ask, "Now how would this experience have been different if you had all seen a movie of this story?" Initially, we assumed that they would answer, "We would all have seen him or her the same way." Much to our dismay, we've found that the answer is often that they would have seen the character the way he or she "really" or is supposed to be."

Children need to have ample opportunity to exercise their imaginations so that they can begin to see that the pictures in their minds are valid too. Storytelling is unmatched as a tool for stimulating the imagination.

¹For a full discussion of the exercise, see "The Mind's Eye," page 67.