

Storytelling, The Cornerstone of Literacy

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Once upon a time a five year old girl was banished to her room because of naughty behavior. Instead of weeping and moaning, she turned off the lights and let the sunlight filter through the blinds. Carefully she slid the miniature china tea set from the shelf. At once she became a storyteller and invited her dolls and stuffed animals to join in the tale. The little girl continued her storytelling for many years until she chose to become a professional storyteller. The storyteller became a teacher of young children. Thus she was transformed into a "Storyteller, Storyteacher." (Gillard, 1996)

Why tell stories?

We are by tradition, storytellers. Humans were given voice and reason to distinguish them from other animals. Infants practice using voice through cries, grunts, and coos. Babbling precedes words. Separate sounds blend into words, followed by phrases and sentences. By ages two or three, a child has become an oral communicator. Eventually children polish their language skills into a story format. As children listen to a story being told in the oral tradition, they are introduced to various forms of syntax, diction and rhetoric. Nelson (2003) explains: "Infants and toddlers use story to explain and create meaning because that's what parents and their culture do."(pp 17-36) Children can be guided through storytelling experiences to recognize patterns in language, to play and manipulate language, and to increase linguistic stimulation for the acquisition of phonemic awareness. Thus storytelling is the cornerstone for literacy.

Barton and Booth, (1990), authors of *Stories in the Classroom*, have discovered: *Story is a living context for making meaning. It can reinforce the imaginative framework of the developing child, give validity to important feelings, promote insights, nourish hope, reduce anxieties and provide a rich fantasy life. (p.14)*

We tell stories to share details of our lives. Personal experiences weave an intricate pattern of oral history. Gossip, tall tales, legends, myths and folklore all began with a storyteller. Each child in the classroom is a storyteller. When educators create a story community within the classroom, story becomes the heart of the curriculum.

In the book, *The Boy Who Would be Helicopter*, Paley (1990) demonstrates the varied uses of storytelling in the classroom. Through recording the stories of her students, she has documented the importance of story play for children. She indicates that her philosophy changed because of her observations and that, "A day without storytelling is, for me, a disconnected day."(p.20) Paley extols the values of storytelling stating "Play and its necessary core of storytelling are the primary realities in the preschool and kindergarten, and they will be the prototypes for imaginative endeavors throughout our lives" (p. 22).

For the past nineteen years, I have been a kindergarten teacher who honors storytelling as the strongest literacy component in the curriculum. As each year begins, the children are introduced to storytelling on the first day of school. By mid year the students tell me, "Just put down the book and tell us a story!" It is a delightful command to which I fully comply. The greatest compliment is when the children ask to be designated as the *Storyteller for Day*.

When I tell a story, I see 33 sets of eyes focused on me. Initially, there may be a wiggling child, but within the first seconds of the story the extraneous movements subside. The children become fully engaged in the process of story. They have entered a secret garden of words, embellished with eye contact, gestures, and movements. Characters take on a vivid personification. The power of story envelops children. They smile or frown according to the whims of the story. When I finish the story, the children sit motionless, transported through imagination. Many respond by asking, "Is that true? Did it really happen?" I never directly answer the questions because I want the children to continue to use their imagination and reflect on the meaning of the story. I may return their inquiry by questioning "Is it real or pretend?" I often hear phrases from the stories repeated during recess and dramatic play.

Story is a brief repose in the noisy world of children who are bombarded with noise every waking hour. Television, videos, computer games, and other electronic gadgets flash images created by adults. Children cannot escape the videos as screens are prevalent in restaurants, doctor's offices, stores and other public places. Their brains are overloaded with extraneous and sometimes meaningless stimuli. Farrell (1992), founder of Word Weaving, Inc., states, "Many students have lost their skill for visual thought. As youngsters listen to stories told directly to them, they are visualizing, identifying, and comprehending literacy language." (p.12). Storytelling provides a safe haven and "confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments" (Bettleheim, 1975, p. 8). When a child is immersed in story, the story is not merely a form of entertainment, but a stimulant to the emotions, intellect and imagination. If story is so powerful, is it possible to measure its effect on learning?

Supporting Research

Specific clinical research on storytelling is sparse; however, brain research is indicating that story and story pattern are effective ways the brain organizes information. Hermann (1991), a specialist in memory enhancement, points out: "Research shows that organized information can be learned four times faster than information that is presented randomly" (p.18). Recall a favorite professor, minister, or public speaker. Were these people excellent storytellers? You may still be able to remember the lesson or message because you received it through story. Smith (1988) notes:

The human brain is essentially a narrative device. It runs on stories. The knowledge that we store in the brain, our "theory of the world" is largely in the form of stories. Stories are far more easily remembered and recalled than sequences of unrelated facts. (p. 178)

Research supporting the use of storytelling is found in the work of psychologist Renee Fuller. Her study involved working with severely brain-damaged children with IQ's in the 20-30 point range. She desired to discover if these children, who had only a slight grasp of language, could succeed in basic reading comprehension. Her vehicle for testing was the use of simple stories instead of series of disjointed facts. She hypothesized that a "story engram" (Stallings, 1984, p. 9) may be built into the human brain. Children showed gains in a basic form of reading comprehension because they were exposed to the telling of stories. Stallings points out in relation to Fuller's finding: "That the children could understand story implies story comprehension is so basic that it survives severe neurological damage" (p.9). The brain is naturally wired to accept and thrive on story. Gopnick has researched the brain and story for the past thirty years

concluding, "Our brains were designed by evolution to develop story representations from sensory input that accurately approximate real things and experiences in the world." (p.24)

Implications for Literacy

The preliterate child exists in a world of playing with oral language. As infants discover their voice, they babble and gurgle to gain attention of caregivers. In the second year of life, children experiment with language and vocabulary increases in a whirlwind of playful word practice. Language becomes a way to communicate needs. Gardner (1991) uses the term "scripts" to describe how children ages two to three years old are able to sequence events. He states: "This is the entry point to storytelling and story understanding...It is universal to construe meaning and one way students could be expected to learn materials if predisposed with event structures" (p.67). From three years through five years, the children perfect language and use imaginative ways to connect words to express thoughts. Stories become prevalent especially in conversations and dramatic play. As children are given more exposure to literature thorough reading, the personal stories become more structured and new vocabulary is practiced.

Finding meaning from words and story understanding is the foundation for reading comprehension. When literacy is emerging in a young child, pictures are relied upon heavily to derive meaning. Preliterate children construct meaning by retelling stories from illustrations. As children "regularly hear stories, subconsciously, they acquire familiarity with narrative patterns and begin to predict upcoming events" (National Council of Teachers of English, p.1). Storytelling provides children with a chance to develop listening comprehension skills. Well developed listening skills are essential to reading comprehension. Children who are fully engaged in a story form of learning "combined with judicious questioning and retelling strategies can develop comprehension skills at literal, inferential, and critical levels."(Dwyer, 1988)

When a storyteller uses multicultural folk tales, fairy tales and myths children are exposed to the abundant richness of vocabulary and complexities of language. Children are presented with the storyteller's gift of dramatizing and exaggerating the written word. The storyteller has the unique task of painting clear visual images with words and voice inflection. Words take on a new contextual meaning but the listener's emotions and folk tales laced with delicious, repetitive phrases or chants invite participation. Children naturally chime in with the storyteller to repeat "Cats here, cats there, cats and kittens everywhere. Hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats" (Gag, 1928). By introducing children to these marvelous examples of literature, they begin to practice language that is not a part of their daily speech patterns. Thus vocabulary is expanded. Chalmers (1973) points out, "As children listen to stories, verse, prose of any kind, they unconsciously become familiar with the rhythms, structures, cadences and the conventions of the various forms of written language."

Morrow (1985) conducted research about the value of retelling stories in relation to improved comprehension. Kindergartners in an experimental group were asked to retell a story which had been read to them. The control group was asked to draw a picture about the story. The experimental group had higher scores in comprehension than the control group. In the second study the experimental group was read eight stories and asked to retell each of the stories. The control group was asked to draw eight pictures,

one for each story. The control group showed a gain of 9.3% in the comprehension scores and the experimental group showed a gain of 27.6%. Morrow concludes: "The study offers empirical data and anecdotal support for the educational value of retelling. When so many skills are improved through its use, storytelling cannot be thought of as a frill." (p. 659)

In order to create a reader, according to Marchisio (1986), both reading skills and reading motivation have to be developed. She thinks storytelling is a way to stimulate the motivation. When she discovered there was little research to back up her theory, she developed a research based project, "Movement Assisted Storytelling as a Vehicle to Motivate Reading in Grades One through Four." She worked with 190 children in grades one through four at three schools in eight classrooms. An hour long storytelling session was presented in each classroom once a week for five weeks. During the session she told a story and the children participated in a movement or drama activity related to the story. A new book was introduced each week, and it remained in the classroom. The fifth session was the turning point as children asked, "Where do I get books like that?" As the exposure to storytelling increased, the desire to read books increased proportionately. Marchisio evaluated the project in several ways: (1) teacher verbal comments, (2) student verbal comments, (3) researcher's observations, and (4) written evaluation forms. Teachers reported an increase in children choosing reading for a free time activity. They also created skits and puppet shows about the stories. New vocabulary appeared in writing activities. Five out of the eight classrooms had an increase in interest in reading as measured by teacher observation and student reading logs. Three weeks after the storytelling sessions were over several teachers reported to Marchisio that students wanted to find more stories like the storyteller told. (pp.22-23)

Storytelling throughout the Curriculum

Egan (1979) advocates using story form to teach all subjects to all young students. The brain research cited earlier confirms that story is one effective way in which the brain organizes information. Early childhood teachers can rely upon storytelling to instantly transform science, social studies, and math concepts into child-centered curriculum. As Stallings (1988) notes, "Master teachers who use stories help students to absorb, understand, and remember effortlessly."(p. 9) Social science lends itself easily to story. As Egan (1986) points out: "The content of social studies involves events, values, places, intentions, individual people and groups...the content of social studies already comes story shaped" (p.65). The teacher can weave facts into story while trying to explain the passage of time. Cultures can be honored through the telling of folktales. African and Native American folktales are embedded with descriptions of family life, village rules, traditions, and explanations of natural phenomena. It is far more interesting to the learner when the facts are within a story. Critical thinking skills are stimulated when children have to discern the truth in a folktale versus reading a text description. When children retell and dramatize historical events, they will remember facts better than if they just used rote memorization. Thus, social science becomes viable to the imagination.

Science concepts are palatable when told in story. A science specialist visited my kindergarten classroom to teach about astronomy. The young man ingeniously told myths and creation tales about stars. After the stories were told, the children created a paper constellation. They were divided into teams and had the task of dictating a story to identify the team creation. This activity was the highlight of the week, and the children

continued to use the science specific vocabulary throughout the year. For example the water cycle can be easily explained to young children by making up a story about a lonely droplet of water. Children are invited to act out how a cloud is formed through evaporation and condensation. Later they further their understanding by writing in science journals and drawing diagrams of the water cycle.

Eric Carle and Leo Lionni are master science storytellers whose books give simple explanations for science concepts. The stories have the elements of repetitive phrases, predictability and surprise endings. *Swimmy* (Lionni, 1963) describes how fish travel in schools. *A Color of His Own* (Lionni, 1969) is perfect for a discussion of camouflage. *The Tiny Seed* (Carle, 1987) describes how seeds travel and implant themselves and the life cycle of a plant. Any of these stories would be great starting points for expository storytelling and dramatic play.

Math does not need extensive explanations when the content is delivered in partnership with story. Kendal Haven (2007) cites the 2004 studies of O' Neill, Pearce and Pick:

The Canadian researchers found a strong correlation between early storytelling activity and later math abilities. They suggest that time spent on stories (telling, reading and listening to stories) during preschool years improves math skills upon entering school. Learning story structure develops logical and analytical thinking as well as language literacy.” (p.4)

Counting stories are abundant on library shelves. Children enjoy making up their own counting stories, especially when classmates' names are interjected in the story. When chant and song are added to the story, the counting is an enthralling game. Young children require concrete activities, in addition to the story form. By adding manipulative materials to the story, there is a completion of learning modalities. Counting riddles help challenge children to respond with more than one solution to a problem. Story problems can be personalized by using students' names or community locations. Children can be directed to develop their own word problems, to tell them as stories, and to write the stories in math journals.

Mem Fox (1993) champions the virtue of storytelling as a basis for writing development. She argues that:

Children are expected to write narratives before they have had a chance to develop the story both orally and mentally. When storytelling is a part of the language curriculum, children develop an understanding of story structure and organization which can form a framework for their own stories. (p.16)

As children comprehend the meaning of a story, they can be guided to identify the basic structure of the story. Visual mapping and story boards assist children in identifying the beginning, middle and end of the story. Frequent oral retelling opportunities increase their ability to organize the story structure necessary before being required to write a story. Fox says:

I weave a million little teaching points in and out of my stories to nurture accidental literacy and to exterminate the need for any nasty, extrinsic, worksheet activities that some educational demolitionist might dream up. (p.123)

Moral education proliferates through storytelling. Fables and fairytales teach through metaphor. Our children are growing up devoid of images of heroes. Sports figures are elevated to heroes, but they are only substitutes for the heroes of folklore. The never ending themes roll on: good versus evil, choices and consequences, death defying acts and life enhancing affairs. When children are introduced to the folklore heroes, "they can be attuned to their anxieties and aspirations, give full recognition to difficulties, and be open to suggestions of solutions to problems" (Bettleheim, p.11). Children develop empathy for characters as their hearts and minds are engaged. "Story is one of the most serious intruders of the heart." (Yolen,1981, p.26).

Michael Gurian (1996) has done extensive studies on the moral development of boys and reports his findings and theories in *The Wonder of Boys*. He states:

All children need stories, yet there is a way in which I think boys are desperate for them. Boys, as they get older, feel less and less able to compete in the emotional arena. Boys need stories and archetypes to give them an internal, reflective language for their feeling experiences. Preaching at a boy to "change" rarely changes him. Showing him, in story, how to transform himself works much better. (pp. 206-207)

Children gain insight about themselves and others from story. As Smith (1986) notes, "Storytelling can maintain and deepen feeling for the suffering of others" (Smith, p.47).

Relating Storytelling to the California Reading and Language Arts Standards

While the benefits of storytelling are evident, it may be necessary to justify its presence in the classroom to an administrator or parents. The following standards are from *The Reading and Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten through Grade Twelve* (California Department of Education, 1999):

Kindergarten:

- 2.0 Reading Comprehension
 - 2.4 Retell familiar stories.
- 3.0 Literary Response and Analysis
 - 3.3 Identify characters, settings, and important events.
- 2.0 Speaking Applications
 - 2.1 Describe people, places, things, locations and actions.
 - 2.2 Recite short poems, rhymes and songs.
 - 2.3 Relate an experience or creative story in logical sequence.

How can the standards be addressed through storytelling? One of the reading comprehension standards is standard 2.4-Retell familiar stories. Polakowski (1995) further defines retelling:

Retelling is a procedure by which a child reconstructs the important elements of a story. This can be done orally, pictorially or in writing. The purpose of retelling is to determine the reader's ability to comprehend text and stories, sense of story structure and language complexity. (p.63)

The story selected for retelling should have an easy to follow plot and storylines. Repetition stories are an excellent choice, such as *The Gingerbread Boy*. The teacher begins by reading or telling the story to the whole class. The story should be on a listening tape for small group or individual follow-up activity. The children are instructed to listen carefully to the story so that they can be storytellers and tell the story later. At the first reading the teacher does not discuss the story. The children are given the task

to pair up with another child and take turns retelling the story. The teacher circulates, taking anecdotal records and observing comprehension and vocabulary. When the telling is complete, the children are asked to return to their desk and draw a sequential picture about the story.

Literary Response and Analysis, standard 3.0, requires that the children identify characters, setting, and important events. Continuing with the example of *The Gingerbread Boy*, the teacher reads or tells the story again on the second day. The children identify the characters, setting and events by collectively constructing a story map or other graphic organizer. The teacher adds drawings to delineate characters and adds visual clues. The children are invited to tell their stories to a partner with an emphasis on characterization.

To further the literary response and analysis, the teacher may refer to Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). At the knowledge level, the children respond to questions about events of the story and draw a response. For the comprehension level the children need to identify and explain the problem of the story. They could brainstorm adjectives to describe the feelings of the old man, woman, or the animals. The application level could be introduced by having the children act out the story using masks and props. For analysis the teacher draws a Venn-Diagram and the children contribute by comparing and contrasting a real boy versus the gingerbread boy. The children could create a song or poem about the story, thus functioning at the synthesis level. Evaluation would be imbedded in an additional retelling in which the children tell the story from the point of view of the fox.

The Speaking Application standards for Kindergarten lend itself to both narrative and expository storytelling. Personal narrative storytelling involves an autobiographical account of a specific occurrence in the storyteller's life. A biographical narrative explores the characterization of a person, including incidents, background information, thoughts and emotions. Fiction and fantasy narratives are told in the third person. The main character changes or solves a problem. In fable narratives, the storyteller relates an event, problem and situation, how the character reacts, the results, and the lesson taught. To assist young children in understanding these concepts, a teacher needs to model and identify the different forms of narrative storytelling. The teacher can assign children the oral task of creating the narrative in either genre or further the literacy circle by adding a drawing or writing activity. To return to speaking applications, the teacher gives the children a chance to relate important life events and personal experiences through storytelling.

Expository storytelling explains concepts and presents facts and information. Sensory details are built into the story. A sequential storytelling presents steps or events in order. For example, the teacher may present the topic, "How to make a peanut butter sandwich." The students are given thinking time to construct the mental sequence followed by time to tell the story to a small group. Informational storytelling could be a news report, summary of a story, or a research report. Basically the facts are given in response to answering *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*. The elements of story are used to make the report more interesting to the listener.

Expository storytelling focuses on answering *how* or *why*. Ancient cultures explained many natural occurrences through *pour quois* stories. For instance, the teacher might

pose the question, "How are rainbows formed?" The students may study about rainbows to learn the facts and then create the expository story by using these facts.

The speaking applications of storytelling are an empowering tool to assist children in developing excellent communication skills. Oral communication skills are lauded as a requirement for success in the business world. By giving students a chance to overcome their public speaking fears at an early age, they will acquire a lifetime skill.

The speaking applications for English Language Learners can also be encouraged with the use of a storytelling community in the classroom. Storytelling safely provides for practice of the English language and an opportunity to try new vocabulary. Students learning a foreign language can benefit teaching strategies which incorporate storytelling as a frequent curriculum structure.

Blaine Ray (2008) focuses on teaching foreign languages and English language development through storytelling. His web site, www.blaineraytpers.com, contains the following information:

The teacher provides comprehensible input in the format of an interesting story that is invented as the teacher asks students interpretive questions. First target language, phrases or vocabulary is translated and presented to the students. The teacher poses a problem in the story and asks questions to elicit vocabulary and grammar from the students. The story is recorded on the board and the language is reviewed as the story develops. Through the use of storytelling the student builds fluency in the studied language.

Storytelling can be a fun vehicle to attain the educational standard content. It can begin when a storytelling community is established within the classroom.

Creating a Classroom Story Community

Storytelling should be introduced as an honored component of the classroom just as it is revered in the Native American and African cultures. Discussing the storytelling cultures, Rosen (1988) says: "The impulse to story is present in every child; a storytelling culture in the classroom refines and enlarges upon that impulse" (p.2). Create a mystique so that the children realize storytelling is a special entity. Set aside a special place for stories to be told, a designated chair, stool or area. Choose one of the following ideas to implement as a ritual transition: dimming the lights, turning on a small lamp, spreading a quilt on the floor, hanging a banner, ringing chimes, playing a specific instrument, or listening to a musical selection. Informal storytelling will occur throughout the day as the children have conversations and dramatic play, but the magic begins when the ritual is fulfilled within traditions. Respect for the storyteller is demanded and modeled by the teacher. The children may need to physically prepare themselves by putting on *story manners*: a quiet still body, legs and arms folded, a silent voice, and eye contact. Two premises make up the cardinal rules:

- When a story is being told, only the storyteller speaks, everyone else is a listener.
- There is no one correct way to tell a story. Each teller is respected for his or her own style.

A teacher will be surprised by the enchantment cast by the spell of the story as the book is put aside and the voice of the storyteller beckons the children to join the journey.

“Children become noticeably more attentive, more relaxed, and yet highly focused.”
(Nessel,1985, p.378)

Teacher as Storyteller

In 2005, an article in *Storytelling Magazine* highlights the results of a joint research survey between The International Storytelling Center and researchers at Project Zero, Harvard University. Storytellers and nine teachers who tell stories in their classrooms were interviewed. The survey reports five fundamental ways stories are being used in American education:

1. Mastery of Skill and Content - Stories have the capacity to engage students by appealing to emotions and to present information and ideas in a conceptualized, embedded way.
2. Personal Development - Teachers use stories to explore complex moral issues to encourage self reflections and personal growth in students.
3. Fostering of Community and Interpersonal Relationships - Stories can help connect students with their own families, neighborhoods, and communities. By simply listening to stories, safe places for students can be created to deal with issues and challenges.
4. Assessing and Evaluating Work - Traditional approaches to evaluation often ignore important aspects of learning. “Using storytelling as part of student assessment is one way teachers can capture these less tangible aspects.”
5. Nurturing Imagination and Creativity - The integration of stories into the curriculum may be one way to activate imaginative thinking at any grade level. (p. 20).

The results of the survey can be used by the classroom teacher to set goals for using story as an integral strategy to deliver instruction. Holladay (1987) points out: “Teachers who use story are more effective than those who do not.” (p. 3).

A storytelling teacher has a daily responsibility to weave intricate webs of story within the curriculum so that it is understood by all levels of students. Her or his story is never ending and continually unfolding. Teachers should not deny themselves the opportunity to be storytellers because they may not feel as polished as the professional storyteller. A distinction needs to be made between a professional storyteller who is hired for a visitation to a school versus the “Storytellers, Storyteacher” (Gillard, 1996) . When the day is over the professional storytellers is off to the next engagement, but the teacher has continuing contact with students.

To support the teacher’s development as a storyteller, look to classrooms and school libraries which already have the materials we need to learn stories. The beginning storyteller should start with familiar tales like *The Little Red Hen*, *Gingerbread Boy*, *The Three Bears*, *Aesop Fables*, and *Arnold Lobel’s Fables*. Chances are these stories are already in the teacher’s memory banks. Children will not mind if a teacher uses note cards or other prompts to remember a story. A storyteller does not memorize a story word for word. The beginning sentences may be memorized as a compass point. Chants and repetitive phrases will benefit from memorization. The art of storytelling, in its bare bones form, is a basic retell, comprehension format- beginning, middle and end.

One of the responsibilities the teacher must display is modeling storytelling with effective eye contact, voice inflection, characterization and gestures. It is not necessary

to expect to be a master at once. Practice in the classroom and add a technique in each retelling of the story. Children will appreciate hearing the same story told more than once. The teacher can avoid hearing “You already told us that story” by prefacing a retelling with, “I need your help. I know I told you this story last week. I am trying to get better at using gestures. After the story I want you to tell me what you noticed.” With very young children and English language learners, it may be necessary to use props and visuals to assist the children with comprehension and vocabulary development. Use cartooning, flannel board, puppets, story boards and drawings as necessary to increase understanding.

Doyle (2000), a professional storyteller and Professor Emeritus of Arizona State, cautions the teacher that “storytelling should not be presented in an anything manner. It should be the best we have to offer.” (p.23) When teaching storytelling to children, the teacher needs to be a coach who guides them through the journey of selection of meaningful material and quality performance. The teacher has the responsibility to introduce the coaching model which includes affirmations and suggestions. Along with modeling storytelling, a teacher works on her storytelling skills as she simultaneously coaches her student tellers. Estes (1993) writes in *The Gift of Story*, “There is no right or wrong way to tell a story. Perhaps you will forget the beginning, middle or the end. But a little piece of sunrise through a small window can lift a heart...I promise it will be enough” (p.29). The following steps are recommended for beginning storytellers:

1. Choose a short story (3-5 paragraphs) that you really enjoy reading or one that has personal meaning. Fables produce instant success.
2. Read the story three times. By the third reading, try to visualize the story, characters, setting, and plot.
3. Remember the beginning, middle and end. Review the problem in the story and how it was solved.
4. Block the story on a blank piece of paper by drawing stick figures to represent the characters and sequence of the story. An outline will accomplish the same purpose. The main goal of the blocking is to move from relying on the text to remembering the story.
5. Commit the first and last two sentences to memory to keep the story focused. Additional phrases or dialog may need to be memorized.
6. Try to tell the story from the blocked drawing.
7. Retell the story in your own words as if you were an eyewitness to the action. Do not worry about forgetting a part of the story. Make up what you forget, but make sure it relates to the ending and the plot.
8. Think about the characters: What do they look like? What kind of voices will they have? How will they move?
9. Now TELL, TELL, TELL, TELL, TELL. A story does not become polished until you tell it at least five times. It will be programmed into your mind and heart.
10. Do not make excuses. Learn just one story, tell it five or more times, then take on the task of learning a new tale or writing your own stories.

What Makes a Good Storyteller

Storytellers and teachers who use story in the classroom have come forth to encourage, teach and entertain with the art of the oral tradition. Each storyteller has a unique style. There is no one right way to tell a story. Kendall Haven, (1997), an educator and professional storyteller, provides this definition: “Storytelling is the art of

using language, vocalization, and/or physical movement and gesture to reveal the elements and images of a story to a specific, live audience” (p.2).

Unlike theater’s “fourth wall”, storytelling is a direct interaction between teller and audience. In fact, the interaction guides the storyteller to play with the key elements of story, eye contact, gestures, pacing, and vocal inflection to adjust the story to please the audience. The storyteller, using the voice as an instrument and the words as imagery, commands the live audience to participate through an imaginative journey. As the teller speaks, the listener creates a living video screen inside his or her brain based upon prior knowledge and experiences. The storyteller and the listener mesh in the process of creating the story together. A good storyteller includes spontaneous and improvisational techniques to enhance the story. A story is never told exactly the same way, as the teller is always inventing the tale anew. The storyteller’s art is to bring forth a story which touches the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual realms of the listener.

Storytellers present their art live in a person to person exchange. While there are storytelling videos available, they do not replace the essential oral tradition art form. The videos are best used for demonstrations of various storytelling techniques and for comparisons of styles. The storyteller has the task of performing story to evoke empathy, compassion, and laughter, and/or tears by connecting directly with each individual in the audience. Facial expressions provide visual cues. Vocal sound effects tease the audience’s senses. Kinesthetic body movements strengthen visual imagery. Voice intonations give birth to vibrant characters. A good storyteller knows how to choose stories for a program and has a variety of stories in his or her repertoire to accommodate the varied ages in an audience.

A storyteller may choose to add puppets, props, scarves, paper cutouts, flannel board figures, or string figures to enhance understanding of vocabulary sequence. Yet the story must remain the primary focus. Musical instruments add a balanced flow and rhythm to a story, but are not a necessary component. Storytellers further the audience participation when they invite the listeners to join in with a chant, song, sound effect, or action. The purest form of the oral tradition requires a trust that the storyteller can weave the magic of words just by using the voice.

Storytellers carefully select stories or write the stories themselves. There are many genres of stories: fables, myths, tall tales, literary tales, humor, and accumulation tales. Good storytellers read and listen to many stories to discover a tale that appeals to their emotions and personality. The storyteller is a keen observer of life, knowing a story may be hidden in the most common places of the heart. After choosing a story, the storyteller reads and envisions the tale. The first telling is just a basic recall of events to establish the story structure. From there the teller plays with the story, polishing the characters, committing first and last lines to memory but never memorizing the whole story. Characters are resurrected from the printed page and molded with voice and body movements. The storyteller learns to trust his or her own language. The first 30 seconds of telling are the most important, as the audience must be captured and held captive for the length of the performance. Perfectly timed pauses give the audience a chance to reflect and process the story. A good storyteller respects the audience and is humbled by the power of story.

Beyond the Classroom Walls

As a teacher becomes a more proficient storyteller he or she may choose to join a community storytelling guild and the National Storytelling Network (www.storynet.org). The local storytelling guilds and national organization present workshops, seminars and festivals. Storytelling performances can become a viable source of an alternative income. By developing a flyer and marketing material, a storyteller can find work in libraries, recreation departments, schools, private parties and museums.

I had the opportunity to go beyond the classroom walls by auditioning for a large urban art museum which uses professional storytellers to tell the stories of paintings and objects of art. I was hired to write and to perform an interactive story based on a 17th century French painting, "The Musicians' Brawl". I met with employees of the museum education department who guided my presentation with input and critique. I developed a 20 minute story program incorporating the history of the painting with music and interactive story play. Performances were once a month for family audiences.

As the family audience groups were seated in the gallery, I engaged them with singing an original song accompanied with my guitar. As I told the story the audience was drawn to the painting. After my telling, I invited audience members to play the parts of the characters in the painting. I narrated the story and cued the players with their lines. The audience participated by singing and making melodrama sound effects. In the 25 minute time frame, the audience heard the story twice. Many parents commented about how their children were so involved and had learned so much through story. Children walked away repeating some of the phrases of the story and singing the song. Their day at the museum and how they view paintings were changed because of the interactive experience with story.

Children as Storytellers

Children do not need encouragement to tell stories. It is their natural state of being. Some may be shy and need coaxing, but once they realize they can command an audience, they will want to tell more stories. "Children at any level of schooling who do not feel as competent as their peers in reading or writing are often masterful at storytelling" (National Council of Teachers of English p.2). Public speaking skills are sometimes delegated to the lower rungs in the classroom curriculum hierarchy. Yet the ability to speak before a group, which sends shivers up most adult spines, needs to be cultivated for future career success.

Introductory storytelling activities can begin on the first day of school. The following activities will start children on the path to later formal storytelling experiences. Children need time to develop their skills, and they need a chance to be successful with mini stories first. These beginning exercises build confidence. Children love to talk about themselves, so the personal story is the place to start. A story stick is a magical tool to encourage the establishing of a storytelling community. To make a story stick:

- Cut a ½" wooden dowel or tree branch into a twelve inch length.
- Decorate the dowel with ribbons, plastic beads, jewels and feathers at the top 3 inches of the stick. Introduce the children to the story stick by inviting them to join hands and sit in a circle. When the children are seated, hands are placed in laps. The rules for the story stick are explained by the teacher.
- The person holding the stick is the storyteller.
- Only the storyteller can speak and the rest of the students are listeners.

- The storyteller needs to use a voice that is loud enough for everyone in the circle to hear. No whispers. (The teacher models this.)
- When the storyteller is finished speaking, he or she may pass the stick to the next child.

For the first five training sessions, it is important for the teacher to model a storyteller's voice and short, simple, complete sentences. Children have a tendency to tell "and then" stories in which they ramble in chaotic phrases. Limit children to one or two sentences thus avoiding one child monopolizing the activity. Children also need time to gather their thoughts. At the beginning of the story stick passing, the teacher quietly counts to 20 and reminds the children to gather their thoughts and place them on their lips. The teacher may find this is an instant oral language assessment tool. Children benefit in the beginning by story starter topics to prevent rambling. It takes about 15-20 minutes for thirty children to pass the story stick. Here are some suggested story starters:

Narrative

favorite flavor of ice cream
 pet antics
 family vacations
 holiday/birthday memories
 injuries
 happy/scary memory

Expository

giving a dog a bath
 washing the family car
 learning how to swim
 making cookies
 growing a pumpkin plant
 how to play soccer

The story stick lessons can be expanded after two weeks of practice. It is suggested that children go to journal writing right after the story circle so they can further elaborate on a story. The story stick can be used in place of sharing time. Every Monday the children can share what happened during the weekend.

Children enjoy retelling a shared reading story and the story stick can be used to enhance this activity. After a story has been read aloud as a shared class activity, the teacher may instruct the children to think about a new ending for the story, to give new qualities to a characters, or to reflect on how the characters solved the conflict in the story. The children gather in the story stick circle and each child contributes his or her idea. The class may also create a new story in round robin fashion with each child adding to the action or dialog. A tape recorder is helpful to document the spontaneous story.

Two other techniques that help develop children as storytellers are telling about a found object and using story cards. For homework children are asked to bring in one unwanted household item or toy that is no bigger than their hand. Kitchen utensils, tools, parts of machines, mismatched socks and mittens are nice additions. Each child speaks about the object with sensory detail, and then the objects are placed in a communal basket. During writing center the children are asked to select one object from the basket and to tell a story. The teacher should model a story to steer children from simple observational statements. After each child shares orally, the students are given paper and asked to draw or write about the story they just told. The basket is always available when students finish work early.

Story cards can be made by children or parent helpers. Purchase three packages of colored index cards, one for *places*, one for *things*, one for *people*. Put magazines, food ads and old calendars on the table with scissors and glue. The children find pictures to fit

the category and glue it to the corresponding card color. The cards are laminated and placed in plastic containers or baskets. Children are invited to select a card and tell a story about the picture. The teacher needs to model the distinction between telling a story and describing the objects in the picture. When mastery is achieved with one picture, another picture and another category can be selected. Writing is a natural extension. Keep the cards accessible to the children to encourage use of the cards during free time.

As students become more proficient in their storytelling from objects and pictures, they will be ready to tell a story from a book. Young children can easily retell from illustrations in picture books. A story may be introduced to the whole class on Monday during a shared reading time. The story is reread by the teacher on Tuesday. On Wednesday the children make story maps and story boards to delineate sequence. By Thursday the children are telling and revising the story. On Friday the teacher can give polishing pointers by working on voice inflections, characterization, and gestures. After several weeks of following this pattern, a class full of storytellers is born! Invite parents to a storytelling festival. The third week of November is National Storytelling Week and Children's Book Week, a perfect reason for a storytelling event. In April, "Turn Off the T.V. Week" and "The Week of the Young Child" are two more celebrations during which children can tell stories at home and at school.

Storytelling Extensions

It is very important when teachers embrace storytelling as a vital element of the language arts curriculum that there is a balance between stories being told for the pure enjoyment of language and stories being told for a specific curriculum goal. Barton and Booth (1990) caution: "But we must be careful not to use story solely for our own teaching goals. Story is an art form unto itself, a worthwhile experience without teaching follow up. If we can enrich learning with story, so much the better." (p. 26) Here are some suggested extensions:

1. Use flannelboard characters to tell the tale.
2. Sequence the story with story charts, maps, and webs.
3. Make a large class story board to which the students contribute the drawings.
4. Have the children draw pictures about the story; write down their dictation.
5. Create multi-media art presentations with clay, paper collages or puppets.
6. Analyze the story looking for similarities, differences, and themes to make a Venn diagram.
7. Retell the story in a round robin fashion.
8. Have children role play the characters with mime, puppets, masks and costumes.
9. Place characters in new situations and retell a new version of the story.
10. Write new stories and tell them for an audience and video or audio tape the teller.

Storytelling Clubs

Once the teacher has gained confidence in guiding her students to develop as storytellers, a school wide storytelling club could be a goal. For the past five years, I have run a storytelling club and constructed a curriculum. In October the 700 students in first through fifth grades receive an individual flyer inviting them to join the Storytelling Club. Kindergarten children are invited based upon literacy skills and teacher recommendation. I limit the enrollment to the first 30 students who return the form and keep a waiting list in case students have to drop out because of conflicting schedules.

Returning club members from previous years have priority placement. The club meets after school on Thursdays from 2:45-3:30. Parents must sign a permission form to provide transportation for off-site events. I have designed a shirt with the title of our club printed in black ink, "Voices of the Future." The children wear the shirt to club meetings and performances. The average attendance has been 20 multiage students, a manageable group.

At the first meeting I model storytelling versus story reading. I begin to read a story and then put down the book and finish by telling the story. I ask the children to compare and contrast the two methods. Within the conversation, they identify story components, eye contact, movement, voice inflection, mime, characterization, and the engagement of imagination. I then discuss the role of a storyteller and the important responsibility a storyteller has to the audience. The story stick is used to begin to coax a storyteller's voice from the children.

From October through May each club session begins with a story told by the teacher or students. Each week I target a specific skill or technique and introduce it through a game. In the first six weeks, the children are guided to select a story from my story files or the library. They learn how to story board so they can make a transition from relying on print to oral language and not stumble with stale memorization. Their first telling of a story is in the basic retell comprehension mode. The students report they are just happy to get through the first telling to a partner. At each session the children practice telling their stories to a buddy, in a small group, and sometimes they even tell to the wall. I circulate and give suggestions and affirmations to the tellers so they can begin to improve and bring excitement into their storytelling. By the sixth session, the students are ready to tell their story in front of the whole group. They have been instructed about stage presence and how to capture the audience's attention. Their confidence has improved.

The most important part of the curriculum involves coaching. The main role of the teacher is to coach the students with affirmations and suggestions. The teacher models this for her students and teaches the rudiments. The power of coaching becomes more effective when students learn how to give affirmations and suggestions to their peers. Affirmations are compliments like, "I noticed you use a deep voice for the troll. It helped me to visualize the character better." Suggestions are positive criticism using "I statements." For example, "I was wondering if you added a gesture to show the character closing the door, if that part of the story would make more sense." When children start speaking to their peers in this manner, their critical thinking skills expand.

Club students are required to learn at least two stories. I provide a story box of photocopied fables and short stories. We frequently visit the library in the first few weeks to find stories. Children may bring in favorite stories from home libraries. Each week the children have a homework assignment related to a skill or technique. They are required to have a storytelling notebook in which they keep copies of stories and club information.

In order to maintain momentum throughout the year, I schedule a public performance every two months, otherwise the children are not as motivated to polish their stories. Performances include Bedtime Story Night, after school performances for parents, performing in other classrooms, bookstores, libraries, community festivals and organized storytelling events. During National Storytelling Week, we host Tellabration, the World Wide Night of Story. It is our first formal performance of the year. Professional

storytellers visit the club so students learn a variety of styles. The classroom teachers of storytelling club students always compliment the splendid confidence and leadership skills the children display.

To watch a very shy English language learner toss away fears and blossom in front of an audience is truly a metamorphosis. It is a gift to witness the moment when a diagnosed ADHD student discovers he or she can be accepted by other students because storytelling is an appropriate outlet for his or her energy. There is a very strong bond established in a storytelling club. The students are transformed into honored storytellers as they embrace the art of story. Parents are amazed by the transformation.

Conclusion

The education pendulum swings to and fro, both stressing and empowering teachers. We cannot blindly accept curriculum changes without analyzing the effect upon the children we teach. Storytelling is an ancient teaching tool and communication skill brought to the forefront with current brain research. It is not just a magical frill, but a viable component of effective literacy programs. By first establishing a storytelling community within the classroom, a teacher can nurture both self and students into blossoming storytellers. In so doing they will all enter an ancient circle of tradition. This ancient art is their gift for the future. As Vivian Paley concludes in an interview:

This is what education is all about, is it not, and where do we get it from? Story. It is story that enables us to see things on many levels. It is original scientific thinking, cause and effect, many approaches, many prisms through which you view a single event, the story within the story.
(Cunningham, 1993, p.10)

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