

CHAPTER 1

Storytelling Is ...

The telling of a tale links you with everyone who has told it before. There are no new tales, only new tellers in their own way, and if you listen closely you can hear the voice of everyone who ever told the tale.

William Brooke

LEWIS CARROLL once called stories “love gifts.” Indeed, when we tell stories, we do give a gift. Storytelling creates for our listeners a sense of mystery, of wonder, of reverence for life. Perhaps most important, storytelling creates a relationship. When I ask my students about their experiences with storytelling, they often remember the closeness, the sharing, but may not remember the actual stories! One student remarked: “I don’t remember what stories my father told me. I only remember that storytelling created a special bond between us. It wasn’t what he told. It was the wonderful knowledge that he found me important enough to take time to tell stories to me.” I asked my then seven-year-old daughter, Jamie, “What would the world be like if there were no stories?” She replied, “Dull, boring, and nothing to say.”

Some storytellers work a quiet, special magic; some, a raucous magic. They are at once the weavers of fantasy, the keepers of genealogies, the keepers of history, wits, wisdom-sayers, spinners of ideas. Storytelling is an art, a science, a way of life. To define storytelling or storyteller is to try to make concrete that which is abstract. Suffice it to say that storytelling is among the oldest forms of communication. It exists in every culture. Storytelling is the commonality of all human beings, in all places, in all times. It is used to educate, to inspire, to record historical events, to entertain, to transmit cultural mores.

Storytellers are ...

Who are the storytellers? Well, in a general sense, we all are. As my daughter Jamie says, “Everything you tell is a story.” If that is true (and I believe it is), storytelling becomes a vehicle for discovering who we are, for making sense of our world, for enhancing our learning/teaching, and for plain old fun!

In his book *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, Fisher (1989) suggests that human beings are inherently storytellers. Humans experience and understand life as a “series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends” (p. 24). Thus all forms of communication can be seen fundamentally as stories—symbolic interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character. McAdams (1993) suggests: “We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories” (p. 11).

Although in a general sense all humans are storytellers, some humans have chosen to use story for specific purposes: for teaching, as oral history, for entertainment, for healing, and for sacred rites. Throughout history, special individuals have acted as keepers and tellers of stories. The ollahms and shanachies of Ireland, the griots of Africa, the Navajo shaman, the troubadours of medieval France—these were the storytellers of old who held honored places in their particular societies. Though none of us may achieve the artistry of these masters whose lives were devoted to storytelling, it is their family that I invite you to join. I encourage you to step into the ancient shoes of the teacher-tellers, to become the “givers and interpreters of myth.” Whether you teach first graders or tenth graders, I encourage you to become a teacher-teller and, in turn, to encourage your students to become teacher-tellers. Why? Because, it seems to me, story is at the very heart of teaching and learning.

Stories are ...

Livo and Rietz (1986) explain that “‘Story’ is a universal mirror that shows us the ‘truth’ about ourselves—who and why we are. When we look into this mirror, we see daily routine and mundane circumstances transformed into something profound. ‘Story’ takes the ordinary and binds it into all of human existence, revealing the significance of the trivial” (p. 4).

Schoafisma (1989) suggests that stories may be seen as *selves*, provisional representations of our struggle to define ourselves and the world. But in the process of shaping those selves, stories also may become one means of shaping relationships with others in the community. In the words of Bruner (1986), a story provides a “map of possible roles and possible worlds in which action, thought, and self-definition are possible (or desirable)” (p. 66). Students, through their stories, explore personal “roles” and “possible worlds.” Sit in a preschool classroom, or listen to the play of elementary-school children or the conversations of adolescents. Words you will hear are, “Let’s pretend that...” and “What if...” Words like these signal a “trying on” of roles, an exploration of whether they are viable or workable.

The power of story

Storytelling is a powerful teaching/learning tool. In her book *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, Vivian Paley (1990) tells why story is so important to teaching:

A day without storytelling is, for me, a disconnected day. The children at least have their play, but I cannot remember what is real to the children without their stories to anchor fantasy and purpose. (p. 4)

By listening to our students, we as teachers can learn what is real to them, and thus know what questions to ask and comments to make to enhance their learning.

For example, when Jamie was six, we had a conversation about how sweets could turn teeth yellow. I was trying to impress upon her the impor-

tance of (a) not eating a lot of sweets, and (b) brushing her teeth. Later that day, she dictated the following three stories:

THREE-EYEBALLED MONSTER WITH A YELLOW SMILE

The three-eyeballed monster with a yellow smile eats sweets. It's eight feet tall. It eats ten sweets a day. Its favorite sweets are *all* sweets. That's why he has a yellow smile.

THE END

THE SILLYRAMJUICE MONSTER

The Sillyramjuice Monster eats three houses a day because it has three heads. Its favorite game is eating houses. It is thirteen feet tall. It drinks lakes. It likes all the toys in the houses it eats.

THE END

THE FOUR-HEADED PIE THROWER

The four-headed pie thrower throws pies. It eats ice cream. It drinks melted ice cream. It throws pies at other monsters. Its favorite word is the end.

THE END

Note the common thread throughout all three stories—eating! As Paley (1990) suggests, in a story a child says, "This is how I interpret and translate right now something that is on my mind." Obviously, eating was on this child's mind. She was, through story, making sense for herself of our earlier conversation.

Students should be encouraged to use stories to "make sense," to enhance their learning. Wells (1986) writes:

Constructing stories in the mind—or storying, as it has been called—is one of the most fundamental means of making meaning; as such, it is an activity that pervades all aspects of learning. When storying becomes overt and is given expression in words, the resulting stories are one of the most effective ways of making one's own interpretation of events and ideas available to others. Through the exchange of stories, therefore, teachers and students can share their understandings of a topic and bring their mental models of the world into closer alignment. In this sense, stories and storying are relevant in all areas of the curriculum. (p. 194)

Schoafsma (1989) concurs:

We who teach often dismiss stories as a primitive form, a form for children, something students need to move "beyond" for the learning they will have to do in schools. However, stories, grounded as they are in students' lives and concerns, are one important means students have for making sense of their worlds, an important tool for learning. (p. 89)

Note the following story written by an eight-year-old, in which she "makes sense" of one aspect of natural life:

HOW THE OCEAN GOT ITS FOAM

Once a cloud fell in the ocean.
 When the cloud put itself back together,
 he couldn't get all itself
 so some was left.
 So that's how
 the ocean got its foam.

As students share their concerns, desires, fears, accomplishments, and dreams through their stories, they become members of what Bruner calls a "culture creating community" (p. 132). According to Bruner, "It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture" (p. 120).

Much schooling today is what James Paul Gee (1986) refers to as essay-text literacy: "Essay-text literacy... is connected with the forms of consciousness and the interests of the powerful in our society" (p. 742). Essay-text literacy is efficient, neatly packaged knowledge. It allows little room for knowledge gained from personal experience. For true learning, narrative knowledge is essential. Narrative knowledge is experiential and cultural knowing. It is the best means available for students to organize their experiences and make meaning for themselves.

Students are not the only ones who should tell stories in the classroom. Obviously, both you and your students will become the teacher-tellers when storytelling is used as a teaching strategy. What grade level or what subject matter you teach really matters little. Elements of storytelling can be used at all levels and in all subjects. A few examples follow; you will recognize many of these as methods you already employ. Storytelling can be used:

- to introduce a unit (explaining to students how you reacted to the assassination of John F. Kennedy could be an effective way to introduce a high school history unit, for example).
- to help explain a concept (a story about a young child's reaction to the first day of school could be used to clarify child development concepts in a family relations class).
- to set the stage for a science experiment (a story about how scientists first decided to do the experiment would be good here).

The possibilities are endless. I remember a high school teacher who, prior to our dissecting a frog, told our sophomore biology class the story of the wide-mouthed frog. (This is a story usually told to younger children. It involves a wide-mouthed frog who travels through the woods asking forest creatures what they feed their babies. The frog finally meets a snake, who replies "wide-mouth frogs.") He explained to us that, although we were using frogs for scientific purposes, we should always remember that frogs are special creatures!

Thus, storytelling can be used across the curriculum and is a powerful teaching tool for several reasons.

Storytelling allows the teacher to provide instruction indirectly

It is easy to embed teaching lessons, information, and mental processes in story form. It is one thing to instruct students in character-building by telling them that "virtue wins over evil" and quite another to relate the story of "Cinderella." The story is far richer psychologically in providing a concrete and understandable lesson on the rewards of virtue. The complex, often multilayered, tapestries of stories provide students with much food for thought.

Storyteller Syd Lieberman suggests that it is the *story* in *history* that provides the nail on which to hang facts. Students remember historical facts when they are tied to a story. Livo and Rietz (1986) report that a high school in Boulder, Colorado, experimented with a study of presentation of historical material. Storytellers present material in dramatic context to the students, and group discussion follows. Students are encouraged to read further. In contrast, another group of students is involved in traditional research/report techniques. The study at this stage indicates that the material presented by the storytellers has much more interest and personal impact than that gained via the traditional method.

Storytelling prompts questions and conversations

Storytelling is both a way to prompt questions and conversation. For teachers, questions are the single most influential teaching practice because questions determine which mental processes students engage in, which points of a topic students can explore, and which modes of thought students learn (Cooper, 1995). In addition, research suggests that conversation—students discussing, arguing, orally creating ideas—enhances learning (Cooper, 1995).

As Richard Lewis (1979) suggests:

One of the ways I look at education is that it is an attempt to elicit response—that to educate means, in effect, to allow the individual to reverberate enough experiences and ideas within himself that he needs to respond. The need to respond is the beginning of framing and forming knowledge so that it becomes understandable for one's self. So going back to the story, it seems to me the story is a kind of melodic line that has a built-in need for response. So when the story brings out questions, it has started a melody which has to be continued by the hearer in some way, either through the response of a question or some other reflection of what the story may have meant for him. (p. 69)

Learning becomes fun when stories are used

When questioned about their favorite teacher, many people relate effective storytelling as the quality they remember most, not the ability to organize material or profound knowledge of the subject. One high school student put it this way: "When Mrs. Nicholson told us stories about why she wanted to become a science teacher—what things fascinated her and why—we began to love science, too. I don't know why, exactly. But, somehow, I wanted to

discover things, too, to see them as she saw them. Learning became a fun challenge.”

In her investigation of the storytelling activity of teachers, Holladay (1987) concludes that teachers who use story are more effective than those who do not. Positive relationships between students and teacher are enhanced through storytelling. In addition, students are better able to relate the content of the course to their personal lives when the teacher uses stories to explain course content.

Let me give you some specific examples. Suppose you are teaching history. Regardless of the grade level you teach, you might use oral histories as a way to help students understand how history “works” in their own lives. I have observed teachers who ask students to collect oral histories of their family members, particularly grandparents and great-grandparents. After collecting these oral histories, students create and tell their own genealogies, beginning with their great-great grandparents and following through to their parents.

I am the great-great grandson of an itinerant farmer—a man who loved the feel of dirt in his hands and the sun on his face—and a woman who kept the farm’s books and household and raised five children. I am the great-grandson of a man who loved learning and taught in a one-room schoolhouse and a woman who was the first librarian in a small Kansas town. I am the son of...

The storyteller presents some brief information about each ancestor. The students could even include information about brothers, sisters, cousins, and so on.

Another successful teaching tool is to have students research famous historical characters and present genealogies for them. The popularity of the 1990 documentary *The Civil War*, presented on public television, should indicate to us all how history can be brought to life through personal stories.

If you are a math teacher, you might have students make up and tell one another story problems. Ask them to share a personal story in which a math error caused them problems. If you teach science, create a unit on “Scientific Myths” or “How Physics Came to Be.” If using the scientific myths suggestion, you might tell stories from Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories* about how certain animals got their major characteristics, then move to more recent myths of science that have been dispelled.

In sum, through research and through personal experience we learn more every day about the central role that storytelling plays in empowering teacher and students to synthesize and verbalize personal experiences, communicate feelings, and construct meaning—processes vital to effective learning.

Conclusion

I have always loved L. B. Singer’s reminder in *Naftali the Storyteller and His Horse, Sus*:*

* Excerpt from *Naftali the Storyteller and His Horse, Sus* by Isaac Bashevis Singer, translated by Joseph H. Singer. Copyright © 1973, 1976 by Isaac Bashevis Singer. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.

When a day passes it is no longer there.
 What remains of it? Nothing more than a story.
 If stories weren't told or books weren't written, man would live like beasts—
 only for the day.
 Today, we live, but tomorrow today will be a story.
 The whole world, all human life, is one long story.

This same idea is expressed at the end of the Chinese folktale "White Wave":

When the old man died, the shell was lost.
 In time, the shrine, too, disappeared. All that remained was the story.
 But that is how it is with all of us.
 When we die, all that remains is the story.

Often, as I struggle to think of stories to use in my own teaching, I remember this and wonder, "What happened in my experience (what I've done or read) that I can use to help my students make sense of this content?" Without fail, I find a story that works! I also say this to children when I want them to tell a story. I say it, and then I ask, "So, what's a story you can tell about today, before it slips away?"

SUGGESTED READINGS

Hardyment, Christina. 1989. *Heidi's Alp: One Family's Search for Storybook Europe*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

This is the story of the journey the author and her four daughters took across Europe. They set out to trace the roots of stories that have captured the imaginations of generations of children.

Paley, Vivian. 1990. *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

This book is the diary of a year in the evolving drama of a preschool classroom and the role story plays.

Pellowski, Ann. 1990. *The World of Storytelling*. New York: H. W. Wilson.

An excellent text for those interested in the history of storytelling. The first seven chapters are devoted to the history of storytelling in numerous cultures.

Stotter, Ruth. 1995. *About Story*. Stinson Beach, CA: Stotter Press.

Written by the director of the interdisciplinary storytelling program at Dominican College, this text offers rich essays about the functions and traditions of storytelling.

Meet the storyteller...

Caitlin Collins

Caitlin is a lively, charming seven-year-old. It was easy to interview Rives' daughter Caitlin because she and I like each other very much and also, Caitlin is a talker!



Photo by Dawn Murray

Q: What are some of your favorite stories?

A: Oh, that's a very hard question. I like so many. I like true stories, but I also like fantasy. I really like my dad's stories about when he was young, especially the ones about when he got into trouble. His father was very strict about manners, and my dad's manners weren't always the best.

Q: What kind of stories do you like to tell?

A: I like to tell stories I've read in a book.

Q: Why?

A: Because I can picture everything in my mind and tell it, but I don't tell it with the same words the author did. I can tell a story after hearing it only once. My teacher read us a story recently called "How Snoeshoe Hair Saved the Sun." I could picture the story in my mind, and then I told it.

Q: Why did you like that story?

A: It was kind of silly, and I like silly stories. But most of all, I liked it because it reminded me of something I am trying to work on my own life—not bragging. I'm really working on that and so the story reminded me not to brag.

Another thing I should tell you is that when I hear a story I really like, I type it into my computer. Sometimes I even leave a space to draw a picture. Anyway, then when I'm bored, I go to the computer and open my file and read my favorite stories over again. So, I have a book of my own of my favorite stories. I like that.

Q: So, a good story is something you can go back to?

A: Yes. There are some stories you just never grow tired of.

Q: Would you rather have someone read you a story or tell you a story?

A: Well, that sort of depends on whether the person is a good storyteller. My teacher mostly reads stories to us, but she wants to become a better storyteller. Now she's trying to learn to tell stories. So not long ago, she told us a story about staying with her mother and weeding in the garden, and accidentally stepping on a hill of fire ants. Luckily, there was a hose nearby so she could spray the ants off of herself, but still they stung. Those bites hurt

really, really, really bad—for a whole week. After she told us the story, we all wrote it down together. That helps her learn to tell a good story, and it helps us learn to be good writers. Now we're working on a story she told us about chipmunks that she watched when she was at her mother's house.

Q: Is your teacher getting to be a better storyteller?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: Well, she's getting better at telling stories by telling more stories.

Q: Do you like to tell stories?

A: Oh, very much. I wrote a story called "Kirsty and the Leprechaun," which I gave my mother for St. Patrick's Day. It's nice to give stories as gifts. I also wrote another story, "Jenny and the Dog."

Q: Did you make that one up or did you hear it somewhere?

A: I got inspired by one of the Boxcar Children books. I really like those books because the children never complain and I love the adventure and mystery in the books. Sometimes, and this happens with books other than the Boxcar Children books, when my mother says, "OK, Caitlin, it's time to turn out the lights and go to sleep," I'm tempted to sneak the light on after she leaves my room and finish the part I'm on. Of course, I never do, but I am tempted!

Q: Do you ever tell your brother Ethan stories?

A: Yes; you know he can't read. But sometimes he tells the story in a book to me. He makes it up from the pictures. I used to do that too, and I think that it's a good thing. It encourages Ethan to look at books and stories. So, I'm supportive. I never say, "That's not what it says," because that would make him not like books and stories.

Maybe I should tell you a story. You know I said I like stories that are true and I like fantasy too? Well, this is a story that my dad and I made up together and you'll see that some is true and some is fantasy. It's about a Saturday morning when my mom was at aerobics class, so my dad was in charge. It's pretty wild when my dad is in charge, if you know what I mean. So here's the story.

(Caitlin told me a story about her father's attempts to change Ethan's diapers as Caitlin blew bubbles out the window. Ethan ends up in a bubble and the chase is on. Through a series of events, they all end up at Baskin Robbins, where Ethan has bubble gum ice cream, blows a bubble and starts to float away again, but is saved by Caitlin. The story lasted ten minutes, complete with movement and voice changes. Caitlin filled my family room as she animated the story.)

It's fun to tell that story again and again. You know, I don't know if this happens to others, but it does to me. When I first start telling a story, like I did for you just now, I feel nervous. But once you get started, you don't feel nervous anymore. You just want to tell the story.

Meet the storyteller . . .

Jamie Hoel

Jamie is 12 years old. In addition to telling stories (she and her mother often do story-telling performances together), her hobbies are ice skating, playing the violin, reading, and biking, and she loves to travel.



Photo by Daton Murray

Q: Why do you like stories?

A: Well, if there were no stories, there would be nothing to say or do because everything you say is a story.

Q: Why do you like writing stories?

A: Mostly because I like stories, and if you couldn't write stories, you couldn't write anything.

Q: Where do you get your stories?

A: From my imagination. Sometimes I write about personal experiences.

Q: After you write a story, what do you do with it?

A: Usually, I type it on my computer. All of my stories are there so I can continue to work on them.

Q: When you tell a story, what kind of story do you like to tell?

A: I like telling spooky stories because people love them. You also have fun telling them. You can imitate the monster or speak like the ghost.

Q: What's the difference between reading *The Wizard of Oz* and seeing the movie?

A: Well, the movie you get to see with your eyes. When you read a book, you have to make up the pictures in your mind. You have to show the pictures to you, because there's no TV or movie screen.

Q: Which is better?

A: I like reading because then you can "see" it over and over and make up new pictures every time. If you watch the movie, you see the same pictures over and over, and that gets boring.

Q: If you want to be a good storyteller, what should you do?

A: Tell stories a lot. Tell stories you think are good stories. If you really want to be a good storyteller, you should use different voices when you need to. For example, if a person in the story is mean, you should use a mean voice and make a mean face—stuff like that.

CHAPTER 2

This Is Why I Tell It: The Value of Telling Stories

A Zuni once asked an anthropologist, who was carefully writing down a story, "When I tell these stories, do you see it, or do you just write it down?"

Dennis Tedlock

BECAUSE I am interested in how storytelling empowers teachers and learners alike in the learning process, I'll focus on twelve reasons storytelling is valuable. Some of these reasons are a result of listening to stories; some are the result of telling them.

Enhances imagination and visualization

Storyteller Jay O'Callahan defines storytelling as **the "theater of the mind."** The storyteller provides the skeleton; the listener **adds the "flesh"** of scenery, character, and so on. As such, the **listener** has to **visualize what the** character and setting look like. Consider the **following opening to the story of Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge** by Mem Fox (1985):

There once was a small boy called Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge and what's more he wasn't very old either.

The listener must imagine **how Gordon looks, how old he is**, his hair color, color of his eyes, his height. **In addition, the listener** has to imagine the characters Gordon knows: Mrs. Jordan who **played the organ**, Mr. Hosking who told scary stories, Mr. Tippit who was **crazy about cricket**, Mrs. Mitchell who **walked with a wooden stick**, Mr. Drysdale who had a voice like a giant, and Miss Nancy Alison **Delacourt Cooper** to whom Wilfrid told all his secrets.

The ability to visualize, to create images in the mind, is at the very **heart of storytelling**, not just for **the listener**, but also for the teller. To **create the visualization and images in the listener's mind**, the storyteller must **have a clear visual image in her own mind**. For example, if the storyteller is **trying to create a visual image of Wilfrid Gordon**, she will need to recall all **the little boys she's known**, create a **composite**, and see that image in her **mind's eye** before she can create **the image for her audience**. The same is **true for any character and for any audience**. I recently told this same story for a **group of adults at a storytelling workshop**. Afterward, a man of **about 50 came up and said**, "That story touched me more than you can imagine. **My mother suffers from Alzheimer's disease, and Miss Nancy reminded me of her.**"

Develops appreciation of the beauty and rhythm of language

My students are constantly amazed at how quickly children “chime in” when a story has a refrain. As children chant a refrain—“King Bidgood’s **in the bathtub** and he won’t get out, oh, who knows what to do? Who knows **what to do?**” or, “Tikki Tikki Tembo-no **sa rembo chari-beri richi-pip peri pembo,**” or “It’s Heckedy Peg. She’s lost her leg. They let her **in,**” or “I do not like **them, Sam-I-am.** I do not like green eggs and ham”—with the storyteller, they **begin to understand** the beauty of their own language as well as its power to create an image and an emotion.

Think about the range of language students encounter in a story—unfamiliar words, archaic expressions, puns, words, and phrases used in **unique** ways. While at a storytelling festival recently I heard again Rudyard Kipling’s “The Elephant’s Child” and again was **enthralled with the language.** Who can fail to appreciate descriptions such as “the nose no bigger than a **bulgy boot,**” “satiabile curiosity,” the “banks of the great grey-green greasy Limpopo River, all set about the fever trees...” Aidan Chalmers (1973) suggests the full range of language usage that storytelling makes possible:

As children listen to stories, verse, prose of all kinds, they unconsciously become familiar with the rhythms and structure, **the cadences and conventions** of the various forms of written language. **They are learning** how print “sounds,” how to “hear” it in their inner ear. **Only through listening** to words in print being spoken does anyone discover **their colour, their life, their movement and drama.** (p. 181)

As students get older, this “full range of language” can continue to be enhanced. During one of my children’s literature classes, a young college football player decided he wanted to tell the story “The Little Engine That Could.” When I asked him why, he **told me this** story:

I come from a very small high school in a remote part of Nebraska. We never won many football games. Our team was getting pretty discouraged. We all wanted to quit. The coach came in one day before a game and told us the story “The Little Engine That Could.” We played pretty good that day! Before every game after that, we ran onto the field yelling in unison, “I think I can! I think I can!” Isn’t that the greatest story?! It **changed my life!** Ever since then, those words “I think I can” have helped me through a lot!

Note that this student learned no new words. But he did **learn the power** of language!

Increases vocabulary

Students may not know the meaning of all words they hear, **but they will understand** them from the context. Storyteller Betty Weeks **provides the following** example. In her version of “The Three Bears,” she **uses the phrase**

“arrested by a constable and put in a house of correction.” She reports having the following conversation:

- Child:* Mrs. Weeks, what’s a constable?
Mrs. Weeks: What do you think?
Child: A policeman. What’s that “house of correction?”
Mrs. Weeks: What do you think?
Child: A jail.

Refines speaking skills

In its document, *Essential Speaking and Listening Skills for Elementary School Students*, the Speech Communication Association (1993) lists seventeen oral communication competencies. Similarly, the document *Speaking and Listening Competencies for High School Graduates* (1993) lists fifteen oral communication competencies. Among these thirty-two competencies to be developed for grades K–12 are:

- Speak clearly and expressively through appropriate articulation, pronunciation, volume, rate, and intonation.
- Organize messages so others can understand them.
- Use and understand spoken language appropriate to the context (e.g., topic, purpose, audience).
- Use nonverbal cues that emphasize meaning.
- Clarify and support ideas with necessary details.
- Recognize when another does not understand the message.

The most valuable learning occurs when a real purpose is involved. Storytelling can help students refine their speaking skills because a real purpose—telling a story—is involved. For example, when telling a story, students should use gestures and body movement, organize the story in a sequence easily understandable to the listeners, speak clearly—all for the purpose of making the story enjoyable for the listener. As Livo and Rietz (1986) indicate, variables such as intonation, pause, gesture, and body language are to the storyteller what hammer and nails are to the carpenter (p. 345). When children and adolescents retell a story they’ve heard, they practice their speaking skills. Teachers should encourage retellings. Betty Weeks, a kindergarten teacher, provides one technique to promote retelling:

I always tell stories at the end of the day because I want children to leave school with the story in their heads. Often they retell the story to their parents on the way home or to their brothers and sisters. So it really does enhance oral language.

Improves listening skills

The Speech Communication Association suggests the following listening competencies to be developed, which storytelling can enhance:

- Listen effectively to spoken messages (hear the speaker, understand meaning, follow sequence of ideas, draw inferences).
- Recognize and interpret nonverbal cues others give.
- Provide effective and appropriate feedback.
- Critically evaluate a spoken message.

When a child listens to a story, she not only hears the words but also understands meanings and draws inferences and interprets the storyteller's nonverbal messages. While she listens, she provides feedback—a smile, chiming in on a refrain, and so on. She also can be encouraged to evaluate critically the story she hears. Does it make sense in terms of her life experiences? Did she like the story? Why or why not?

Allows students to interact with adults on a personal level

The power of the relationship that can be created is often surprising to education students. When they venture into classrooms to tell stories, they are, at first, somewhat uncomfortable with the closeness that occurs. Young children tend to crowd close to the storyteller, often wanting to sit on her lap or touch her. They shout, "Tell us another! Tell us another!" or, "Come back tomorrow!" Often they ask questions about the storyteller's life: "Are you married? Where do you live? How old are you?"

This relationship building can occur when the teacher tells a story about himself. It may be the first inkling students have that this teacher is a real person, one who grocery shops, goes to the movies, has fears and frustrations. This sort of knowledge is what builds a relationship. I sit in the classroom of teacher-teller Betty Weeks. I watch the kindergarten children sitting at her feet (almost on them!). Their eyes tell it all. They cannot wait for her to begin. This is a teacher they will remember always. This story time is special. No matter what else has happened during the day, they leave with a story.

Enhances writing skills

Essentials of English (National Council of Teachers of English, 1982) is a document that states as its purpose: "to identify the ways in which the study of English contributes to the knowledge, understanding, and skills of those who will make up the society of the future."

In the section focusing on writing skills, the following objectives are outlined:

- Learn to write clearly and honestly.
- Recognize that writing is a way to learn and develop personally, as well as a way to communicate with others.
- Learn ways to generate ideas for writing, to select and arrange them, to find appropriate modes for expressing them, and to evaluate and revise what they have written.
- Learn to adapt expression to various audiences.

Storytelling can help enhance writing skills. By hearing and telling stories, students learn to write their own stories, and by doing so they master the objectives above. Let me give you an example of how this can work. Several years ago I was teaching a course entitled, "Presentational Forms of Children's Literature." One group of students was interested in writing stories to perform. They contacted a junior high school and got permission to interview eighth-graders. They asked the eighth-graders to tell them about their hobbies, their concerns, their fears, things they like to do, and their most embarrassing moments. In essence, they asked the eighth-graders, "Tell us your story of what it's like to be an eighth-grader." My students then wrote stories utilizing the information they gathered, and then they performed them for the eighth-graders. The title of the performance was, "A Day in the Life of an Eighth-Grader." After the performance, my students discussed with the eighth-graders how well they had captured the essence of an eighth-grader's day. This experience gave my students a chance to utilize storytelling to enhance their writing skills.

Develops reading skills and sparks an interest in reading

In my storytelling classes I am amazed at how much literature students read to find "just the right story" to tell. As they read, they search for the story's meaning and analyze and evaluate the literature. In addition, they find pleasure in reading. Thus, storytelling enhances reading skills.

At the conclusion of the performances in schools, I like to share a secret with the children. "Would you like to know where I get my stories?" I ask in my best conspiratorial voice. "It's a secret, but I'll tell you if you promise not to blab it around." By now, I am speaking in a whisper; the children are leaning forward to hear. "I get my stories" (eyes move left and right to make sure nobody is spying on us) "... I get my stories from..." (pause; I look them in the eyes and mouth the next words without making a sound "... the library. Shhh! Don't tell anybody! It can be our secret. Just remember: Everything I told today—and a whole lot more—can be found right here in your school l-i-b-r-a-r-y."

I have learned it is a good idea to warn librarians and media specialists before I do this. They report stampedes: Where are the Norse legends? Can you help me find the 398 section? Do we have *Jumanji*? Where can I find the stories by Edgar Allan Poe? Do we have African folktales? After a storytelling performance, the library becomes a very busy place.

Teachers for junior high and high school students report similar experiences. For example, after being told a story from *The Time-Ago Tales of Jahdu*, several members of a junior level English class rushed to the library to get other books by Virginia Hamilton. One junior high English teacher recently read to her eighth graders the Newbery Award-winning book *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. After a lively discussion of what growing up female means and what growing up male means in our society, students asked to read more books in which those issues are considered.

Enhances critical and creative thinking skills

Stories that have riddles or problems to solve are particularly helpful in enhancing creative/critical thinking skills. Betty Weeks likes to illustrate this idea with her telling of the Welsh tale, "Morgan and His Pot of Brains." Poor Morgan, you see, was just not very bright. As the villagers would say, "Intelligence was not a burden he had been asked to bear." More than anything, he wanted the pot of brains from the little man so he would know how to make his way in the world. In this rather grisly story, Morgan must do the bidding of the little man who stands grinning over the simmering pot of brains. Each time Morgan returns with the heart of the thing he loves most dearly in all the world, the little man confronts him with a riddle: "What shines and is yellow but is not gold?" Morgan doesn't know. "What is old, old, old, yet is new every month?" Morgan doesn't know. "What runs all day without moving?" Morgan hasn't a clue.

The riddles are never answered in the story. When it is finished, the children's hands shoot up. It has been a story rich with suspense and strong feeling, but often the children are still curious about the riddles. While children are feeling, they are also thinking. Perhaps like Morgan, they long to have enough sense to make their way in the world. Hours later a child may shout, "The moon, Mrs. Weeks. It's the moon."

A powerful story I often tell to high school and college students is "Many Moons," by James Thurber. I like to tell this story because lively discussions ensue about the relationships among the characters, the real nature of each character, who fools whom, and so forth. Thus, students are asked to think critically. In addition, I encourage them to think creatively in a follow-up activity. I ask students to create stories that are of the "what's it made of" or "how did the stars get into the sky" variety.

Nourishes students' intuitive side

Storytelling involves much more than regurgitating or creating content. It involves a feeling: How does the storyteller feel about the characters? The story's theme? His audience? Not often can we, as teachers, involve our students' whole brains, their thinking and feeling, at the same time. In storytelling we can. For example, when I tell the story "The Gift of the Magi," I am not just telling a story about a wife who sells her hair to buy a watch chain for her husband, who has sold his watch to buy combs for her long, beautiful hair. That's not a great story. The great story occurs when I feel the wife's great love that enables her to make the sacrifice (I, too, have always coveted long, beautiful hair, so I can relate to the sacrifice in a personal way) and the feeling she has when she discovers her husband's love is great enough that he has sold his most valued possession to buy her a gift. When I keep these feelings close to my heart as I tell, I am a better storyteller.

In addition, much of our schooling focuses on our logical side. Our feelings are often negated when they are expressed. But storytelling says, "Hey, it's okay to feel. Feelings are valid. Feelings are what make us human; they are a part of what we are." Storytelling allows us to express our feelings. We can laugh or cry.

Helps students see literature as a mirror of human experience

Storytelling reflects human motives, frailties, values, and conflicts. In his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales*, Bruno Bettelheim (1975) suggests that folktales are recipes for examining the human condition. He argues that fairytales enable children to learn about human progress and about possible solutions to human problems. Children learn that struggling against difficulties is unavoidable, but if they confront the unexpected or unjust hardships directly, they can emerge victorious. As Maguire (1985) suggests:

Storytelling gives children more scope for working out their dreamlike perceptions of life, for symbolically confronting its myriad opportunities and difficulties. It equips them with tools—images and words—that they can use to test their intuition and powers of judgement; and it safely and gently introduces topics that can later be discussed openly outside of the privileged world of storytelling. (p. 20)

Every story is told to say something about what life means. Stories help us make sense of our experiences and understand the experiences of others. How wonderful it is when we connect through story, when we can say, “That reminds me of the time I...” or, “I’ve had that same feeling...”

Helps students understand their own and others’ cultural heritage

One of the best ways to understand our own culture is by hearing stories. I give the students in my children’s literature class an assignment that helps them understand this. I explain to them that folklore is the lore of the folk, so all people have folklore. I then ask them to divide into small groups and tell one another the folklore of their university. One story is about the ghost in University Hall. Another story explains why the sorority houses are on one end of campus and the fraternity houses on the other. I then ask them to explain why those stories got started and passed down, what they say about what it means to be a Northwestern University student. I also ask them to think about the lore of their family and how the stories they are told about various members of their family help to give them their identity. For example, what do the stories of my Grandfather Cooper tell me about who I am, about what it means to be a part of the Cooper clan?

Storytelling is also a way of helping students understand a culture different from their own. As Ann Nolan Clark (1969) writes:

Children need to know of other nationalities and races so that, inheriting an adult world, they find a free and joyous interchange of acceptance and respect among all peoples.... There is a need for awareness that each group of people has its own special traditions and customs. There is a need for acceptance of these differences. There is tragic need for loving communion between children and children, children and adults, adults and adults—between group and group. (p. 89)

As storyteller Syd Lieberman suggests, "If you want to study another culture, what better way than to hear it through stories." I was a visitor to Ireland several years ago. Beforehand, I decided to see if I really could understand a culture by reading its stories, so I read Irish folktales, lots of Irish folktales. The more I read, the more I began to understand. When I got to Ireland, I felt a sense of "at homeness."

When I was a visiting scholar at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, I used storytelling as the major teaching strategy in my oral communication classroom. As a result of my using personal experience and folktales to teach intercultural communication, students not only learned communication principles but also applied these principles to different cultures. That is, the stories helped students understand communication in cultures different from their own. (Cooper, 1994)

Conclusion

In the book *The Talking Bird and the Story Pouch*, Amy Lawson (1987) tells the story of a reluctant storyteller, a young man whose father handed down the Story Pouch and the Talking Bird, the necessities of a storyteller. The boy does not really wish to be a storyteller, and so he does not gather stories, nor does he tell them. His mother warns him that unless he does so, he will lose the Talking Bird, the charm that helps him find stories to put in his story pouch. Not until the storyteller sets off on a journey and tells his stories to those he meets does he begin to see the value in the occupation handed down to him by his father. In this chapter I've outlined many of those values. Like the young man, you'll recognize those values as you tell your own stories and hear the stories of others.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Brett, Doris. 1988. *Annie's Stories*. New York: Workman.

Based on her experience with her own daughter, the author provides stories to help children cope with real-life situations and explains how parents can adapt the stories to their individual circumstance.

Coles, Robert. 1980. "Children's stories: The link to a past." *Children's Literature* 8: 141-146.

Cole writes about children's "natural" development of an interest in story and its role in their lives.

Wallace-Brodeur, R. 1989. *Stories from the Big Chair*. New York: Macmillan.

This book contains seven stories, one for each day of the week. They are told by a little girl named Molly, who is tired of her little sister, Susan. The stories she tells help her better understand herself and Susan.

National Storytelling Association. 1996. *National Storytelling Directory*. Jonesborough, TN: National Storytelling Press.

This directory lists storytellers, organizations, events, periodicals, educational opportunities, broadcast programming, and production companies dealing with storytelling. It also includes several articles. A super resource!

Meet the storyteller...

Anne Shimojima

Anne Shimojima is a full-time school library media specialist at the Braeside School in Highland Park, Illinois. A freelance storyteller who specializes in folktales from around the world, she is also a member of the board of directors of the Wild Onion Storytelling Celebration.



Photo by Lathna B. Blevens

Q: So, Anne, you're a full-time librarian?

A: Well, I'm actually called school library media specialist now.

Q: School library media specialist. At Braeside School in Highland Park. How long have you been doing that?

A: For 21 years. Before that I taught school in Chicago on the south side for one year.

Q: Great. Can you tell us how storytelling is a part of your Instructional Media Center?

A: I use storytelling to share the gift of story, to lead children to books, and to support and extend the curriculum. And there are a lot of ways you can bring storytelling in. I bring it in whenever I can because I love to do it so much and because the kids love it so much. For instance, in kindergarten and first grade, we do it with creative drama where I tell a story and the kids act it out. In second grade, they do a very big unit on folktales and fairytales. And because we're flexibly scheduled we can schedule according to need. So during the six or eight weeks of a particular unit, the classes come in every day for a combination of reading and telling. We might tell folktales from all different continents when we're working on continents in geography. And I tell stories.

A culminating activity is that we create a picture book where I tell a story and then we divide it into scenes. Each child gets a scene and then has to rewrite just that part of the story, so it's not the burden of rewriting the whole story. I type it on paper and they illustrate it and then every child gets a copy of the entire picture book.

What's amazing to me is that they'll be able to tell me the story back. I'll do long stories because we have to get twenty-four, or however many kids there are, scenes in there. So I'm doing things like "Wiley and the Hairy Man," which is a wonderful story. And I'll tell that story once and say, "Okay, what's the first thing you remember?" And by golly, they know the whole story.

Q: What grade?

A: Second.

Q: Wow!

A: And I mean, they've heard stories since kindergarten. And they've heard a lot of stories. But it still amazes me that they can hear a story of that complexity and give it right back to me. In third grade, we do a "Jack Tale" unit—I tell all my Jack Tales (like Jack in the Beanstalk—there are lots of stories about Jack) then. And again, we draw pictures—a favorite part, remembered images.

We retell stories. A lot of times, I'll put the kids in a circle and have them retell a story round robin.

Another culminating activity is to do a video. It's just like the picture book, but instead of putting it into book form, the kids draw big 12-by-18-inch pictures and then I videotape the pictures while they read their parts. In fifth grade, we do a very big Native American unit and each child has to learn and tell a Native American legend. So at that point, I'm taking them in small groups and helping them learn how to tell stories. In fourth and fifth grade, I meet with the kids over a period of four to five weeks and I tell stories and they rewrite them, so it becomes a writing activity. I think it's very good for recall and sequencing and vocabulary. We urge them to add detail to the story, and we talk about what can be changed and what can't be changed. They can't change the plot or the ending, only the details, so they're very creative in how they do that.

Q: Tell me about working to help your fifth-graders be storytellers. How do you do that?

A: The first thing I do is tell a very short story. They've heard stories all through their years. But I say, "This time, when you listen to me tell a story, I want you to pay attention to how I'm doing it, okay? Watch what I'm doing with my hands and my voice and my eyes." And then afterwards, I'll say, "Now, what did you notice?" "Well, you looked at all of us right in the eye." "You didn't look at one person. You looked at everybody." Or, "Your voice went up and down." Or, "You used your hands," or whatever. And we talk about the components of storytelling. They all choose a story to learn.

Q: Is that process important? The process of choosing a story?

A: Oh, absolutely, because I think you're most successful with a story that you personally connect with and like a lot. I mean, that's half of it right there. And I think they have ownership and a sense of power that they can choose the story. We have a very large collection of Native American legends that they choose from.

Q: So one of the other things you're teaching is research. They're going through collections finding a story...

A: Right. And what makes a good story.

Q: Do they have to read several stories before they find one that works?

A: Absolutely. Yes. And then we do a story map, which is a chart that divides the story into protagonist, antagonist, initial action, problems...

makes them constantly look at the structure of their story as an aid to learning. We say, "You're not memorizing this story. And be conscious of why you chose this story. What did you like about it?" Then, the next time we get together, they get up and tell their stories. We all give positive comments as well as ideas to help them make this a better story. We continue to meet and every time we meet, they're retelling their stories and you can see they're getting more and more polished, they know it better and better. At the end, they tell the story in class. They create, through the research in the library, a museum in their room. We've divided it up into regions—here's the Northwest region, the Plains region, the Southwest. They've created basically a museum exhibit of their region. They've created artifacts and charts and pictures and as part of it, they tell the story.

Q: Oh, that's great.

A: It's a very involved, long unit.

Q: Do they dread the storytelling?

A: Oh not I think they might be a little nervous at the beginning because they haven't done this before, but I think they enjoy it. They look on storytelling as a really enjoyable thing. I think they like being storytellers.

Q: Is there understanding that comes from learning the stories of another culture?

A: I think it gives you a different facet of the culture. And it's a very important facet—one that often is missed when people are concerned only with information. I think if you're going to do any kind of cultural setting, you bring in the stories of the people to better understand the culture.

Q: Can we shift gears for a second? You know that I came to storytelling from the world of theater. You came from a different place. Is that right?

A: Yes, yes. I came from the library, which is really different from theater, because theater focuses on performance, and we don't come to storytelling from performance at all. We think of it in terms of bringing literature to children and enticing them to read books with the sounds of the words. When I got into this, I wasn't thinking at all about being a performance artist or anything like that. And at the school, I'm more concerned with the educational end of it.

Q: Can you describe your style?

A: I have a very straightforward, fairly quiet style. I'm not adding the flash; the substance has to come from the stories. I don't have a musical instrument with me. I'm not a stand-up comic. I'm not an actor. I'm drawn to stories that are strong in plot, that have meaning.

Q: Have you learned not to apologize for your style?

A: It gets intimidating when you see people perform who are very funny or who are very theatrical. But I have been told that my style allows the story to come through really clearly.

Q: Do you want to comment at all about being an Asian American storyteller?

A: I'm Japanese American and my parents did not lay a whole lot on me verbally. When I became a storyteller, to my great surprise, I ran up against this Japanese thing that we shouldn't stand out in the crowd. Because Japanese psychology is group psychology. Everybody blends into the group. And all of a sudden I was finding myself up in front of the room with a large group of people all looking at me. And this Japanese-ness just came out in me that I didn't know existed and I had to get over it. And in getting over it, I discovered that I liked being a storyteller and people's attention being on me because it was happening in a very positive way. So I look at storytelling as helping me grow past my cultural limitations. But I think part of growing old and maturing is that you have to grow beyond where you came from. There aren't very many Asian storytellers so I get called on more and more to do the Asian stories. When I started storytelling, I was not looking for Asian stories, I was just looking for a good story. It's hard enough to find a story. I mean you can read thirty or forty stories until you find one you want to spend the time to learn to tell. But as I've been asked to tell Asian stories, I've had to spend some time looking for them. I like it. It's made me disciplined.

Q: In this era of "back to basics," "test scores," and "high technology," why do you think storytelling is so important?

A: Storytelling does what all good art does. It lifts us to the best of what being human is. It brings us all together. Storytelling connects us with the part of ourselves that responds to truth and beauty. I love my work, but storytelling is my bliss.