

FEATURE

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in Empowering
Learners &
Teachers

Our Pla



ce in the Universe

The Importance of Story and Storytelling in the Classroom



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In the Beginning

When our ancestors first tried to understand the world around them, they told stories. Lightning struck when an angry Zeus hurled thunderbolts, forged in the heart of a volcano, down from the clouds. Children in Africa learned morals from stories of the wily and cunning spider Anansi who used his tricks for his own gain. Today, we also use story to try to understand why things happen. Our era has seen teens learn of the dangerous impact of a bully in *13 Reasons Why*. Our children learn the importance of love from *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*. Stories have power, and the stories we tell today do just as much to try to explain our world as did the myths of so long ago.

Storytelling is a part of who we are as humans. Melvil Dewey himself saw the need to catalog folktales and stories from the oral tradition in the 390s, a section dedicated to social customs. Stories form a part of the very fabric of who we are and give insight into the past as much, if not more so, than the histories that we read. Readers see in Chaucer's prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* a snapshot of the medieval world. Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* serves as a metaphor for the dying age of chivalry. We turn to our stories to glimpse, if only for a fleeting instant, a reflection of the near or distant past. As teachers, we can leverage our students' own narratives, along with the Four Cs of 21st-century learning, to create educational opportunities within our classrooms.

Storytelling, the Brain, and the Four Cs

The Four Cs of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity go hand in hand with storytelling projects in the classroom. The Four Cs were established by the

National Education Association (NEA) to help teachers add 21st-century skills to their classrooms by providing a framework for incorporating these skills. This framework is a starting point, not a panacea. NEA also provides links to additional resources that will help when preparing lessons for a 21st-century classroom (NEA n.d.).

When crafting a narrative, a student (or teacher) cannot help but employ each of the Cs as the story is crafted, polished, and told. Whether it is the story of a fugitive slave in American history, a retelling of a classical myth, or a fresh new piece of fan fiction, students working individually or in groups and using the Four Cs will produce fantastic results. Although a wonderful thing about storytelling projects is their ability to be completed in groups, collaboration among classmates can also be built into projects that involve peer review of single-author works.

The brain behaves differently during a story as well. According to Annie Murphy Paul, when the brain processes sensory words, not only do the vocabulary areas of the brain activate, but the sensory areas of the cortex do as well (2012). The brain actually *experiences* the story in the same way it would as if you were inside the narrative itself. Further, stories make us more empathetic and able to understand the thoughts and feelings of others (Paul 2012). If stories foster greater empathy, then telling stories may serve to deepen students' understanding of others. Since stories create interconnectedness and community, they are a natural fit for a project-based approach.



Project-Based Storytelling

Atwitter about History

When I taught history, I taught it as a narrative; I did not teach it as a litany of facts, dates, and names. We talked about the past as a series of interlocking events and how there was a causal relationship between the things that happened. For example, we looked at events during the American Revolution that directly impacted the wording in our Bill of Rights. When my students completed projects, they were storytelling projects, not "Google up some facts and dates" projects. I think my favorite project was "Tweeting about the Past." For

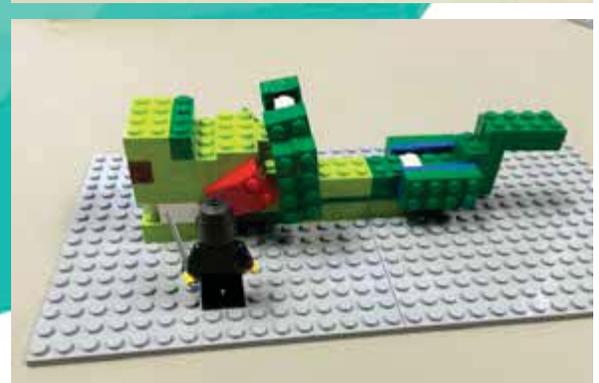
Stories form a part
of the very fabric
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give insight into
the past as much,
if not more so,
than the histories
that we read.



The Rabbi fashioned his golem from the clay
near the river...

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and wrote the word "Truth" on his forehead.



this project, I assigned students a conquistador in the first year and a major 20th-century event in my second year. The rules were simple: 140 characters (including spaces) per tweet, a minimum of 20 tweets split evenly between historical facts and what students thought they might see/think/feel/hear as the conquistador or a participant in the event, and promised extra points for creativity. I expected a mundane series of observations, but what I received instead were stories. One student's tweets led me to experience the voyage of Magellan; another student conveyed the excitement of the golden age of Broadway. The students really had to work to convey a complete thought

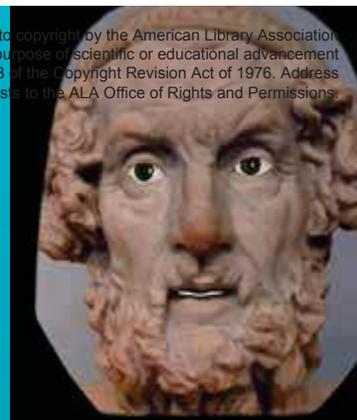
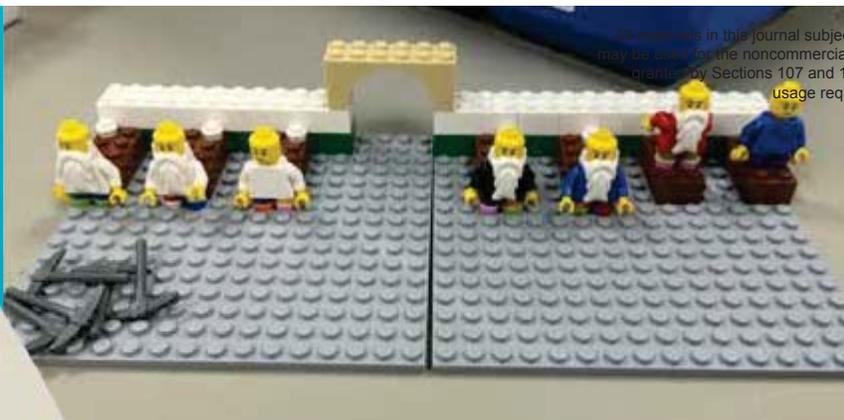
in only 140 characters, but they still completed a cohesive narrative.

At the time of this project, I was both teaching history and working as the full-time librarian in my school. This combination of responsibilities provided me a terrific opportunity to spend time teaching my students information-seeking skills and some resource evaluation. I decided I'd rather keep it simple with fifth-graders and focus on being able to choose a reliable resource and properly document resources for this particular project. I have always believed, and my professors in library school taught us, that information-seeking skills need context as much

as learning to fish requires a body of water. It was easy to collaborate with myself by bringing my classes into the library, but for storytelling projects, even those that are fiction-writing projects, it is always important to include the library in the process so that students have an opportunity to do research in context.

The Truth Is in the Telling

Another standout project came when I asked students to choose a relative, preferably a grandparent, and interview the person. I had recently lost my last living grandparent, and I spent a lot of time grieving the loss of some of the songs and stories he



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would tell that I simply could not remember. Once again, in an effort to demonstrate to my students that history is narrative, we used journalistic and storytelling techniques to convert these interviews into histories of their own families. Students recorded their relatives whenever possible and used those recordings to create the narrative. Once narratives were completed, students brought digital copies of their family's pictures; the photos were imported into movie-making software. A family's narrative was

read as a slideshow cycled through the photos, creating a multimedia story that could be shared and kept as a part of each family's history.

As before, I collaborated with myself in the library to teach students the difference between primary and secondary sources. Because they were telling stories that were experiences of their own family members, I stressed that these eyewitness accounts were, in fact, primary sources of history despite these episodes not having been

described in our textbook. Though we can read about World War II, some of our grandparents and great-grandparents actually survived it. Through these journalistic interviews, students discovered the richness of eyewitness accounts and the importance of primary sources in research. Once their histories were complete, we discussed them as secondary sources, and I could explain how we can use quality secondary sources in our research because, oftentimes, researchers themselves have gone back to

primary source documents to create their own works.

One student's project in particular should be highlighted. She asked if her great-grandmother could narrate the story in her own words. I knew the video would be difficult to produce, would require additional software, and create extra work, but I told my student we'd give it a shot. I showed her how to use the software she would need and silently hoped for the best. With a little bit of luck and a lot of sweat equity, she finished the project beautifully. What I didn't know at the time was that her great-grandmother had told my student that she wondered why she was the one telling the story. When the project was shared with her family, however, my student's great-grandmother finally believed that she had something important to say (Cherry 2012).

Tools for Digital Storytelling

Many tools can prove very useful for storytelling in the classroom. One of my favorites is using LEGO bricks to construct narrative scenes and then importing photographs of the creations into a program such as Microsoft Publisher to create a graphic novel or into iMovie to be combined with narrations over the scenes. Scenes can even be constructed and shared directly with the class. The really special thing about generating an e-book, however, is that it can be cataloged in the school library's online public-access catalog, making each student a searchable author.

Another useful tool for individual work is the iOS app Morfo. Morfo allows students to animate a two-dimensional photograph that moves in sync with dialogue recorded by the user. Morfo offers a paid version and a free version, and the free version is suitable for the majority of classroom applications. The Morfo interface is

user-friendly, and the tool exports completed movies directly to an iPad's photo gallery.

Technology supports a wealth of storytelling options and can be used to create digital book reviews, digital puppet shows, and even movies with green screen and video-authoring apps. All of these options can be elements of storytelling, whether we are sharing the last book we read (no spoilers, of course), or creating a walking tour of our campuses. STEAM programs can benefit from these storytelling projects as well, whether they involve creation of illustrations in an art class or students' use of their own art as the impetus for their stories. Our stories have evolved from tales told around fires and in mead halls to dynamic multimedia events. This change, however, does not and should not lessen the impact and importance of the stories we tell.

Conclusion

Charles de Lint wrote in *The Blue Girl*, "No one else sees the world the way you do, so no one else can tell the stories that you have to tell" (2006). This recognition that individuals are the best tellers of their own stories is especially true of our students. They each see the world uniquely, and their perspectives on social events, concepts, and social interaction are just as important as ours are as their teachers. When adults tell stories, they tell them from the perspective of years of experience. Students, on the other hand, may be seeing a story—their own or someone else's—for the first time, and this fresh perspective will most certainly shape our own.

I asked my students to tell stories because I wanted them to see firsthand how story is woven into the fabric of our existence. The stories are there somewhere, as

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote; we have but to record them (2000, 145). Our students all have stories to tell; we just need to give them a platform and an audience. Whether the story is told in LEGO bricks, claymation, puppetry, or text, all that matters is that the story gets told. Our classrooms and libraries have become the mead hall, our students the bards. As a school librarian, a father, and a lover of stories in all forms, I believe with all of my heart that when anyone tells a story, that person changes a life.



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