

ED299574 1988-00-00 Storytelling: Its Wide-Ranging Impact in the Classroom. ERIC Digest Number 9. IDEN: *Story Telling by Children; ERIC Digests

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Storytelling is a creative art form that has entertained and informed across centuries and cultures (Fisher, 1985), and its instructional potential continues to serve teachers. Storytelling, or oral literature, has many of its roots in the attempt to explain life or the mysteries of the world and the universe--to try to make sense out of things (Tway, 1985). In doing so, the characters and themes in the stories have become cultural and often cross-cultural archetypes of historic and continuing importance (Lasser, 1979). Even in today's technological world, we have not changed to such a degree that the archetypes presented in traditional oral literature are no longer applicable (Livo and Rietz, 1986).

Rosen (1986) enumerates several factors about the universality of narrative that merit consideration: 1) human beings dream and speak to themselves in narrative (inner narrative speech), 2) a basic form of narrative is not only telling but also retelling, and 3) narrative is oral in the sense that an individual can engage with it fully without encountering it in written form. Storytelling, probably the oldest form of narrative in the world, is not the same as reading aloud, because in storytelling, the interaction between teller and listener is immediate, personal, active, and direct. Preece (1987) discusses 14 narrative forms which children use routinely and regularly.

STORYTELLING IN THE CLASSROOM

In 1984, the Commission on Literature of the National Council of Teachers of English applauded an emerging trend in schools and communities which emphasizes storytelling as literature (Suhor, 1984). Numerous articles and papers entered in the ERIC database between 1985 and 1988 have discussed the benefits of storytelling in developing language abilities, appreciation of literature, critical thinking and comprehension, and understanding of community and self.

In discussing how storytelling involves the control of language for narrative, for example, Wyatt, et al. (1986) describe the application of storytelling in teaching children to write as though they were doing so for media. Alparaque (1988) notes another important benefit related to the development of the appreciation of literature--the power of storytelling to bind attention and to bridge real and imaginary worlds.

George and Schaer (1986) investigated the effects of three mediums for presenting literature to children and discovered that storytelling and dramatization were significantly more effective in facilitating recall of prose content than was television. These findings indicated that storytelling is a viable method for stimulating children's imaginations, ultimately leading to a higher cognitive level in student responses. Reinehr (1987) discussed ways to use mythic literature to teach children about themselves and to help them write their own stories and legends. For very young children, the sequencing of events or the shaping of stories may be difficult, as children tend to ramble. However, sharing stories can give youngsters more of a "sense of story"--an awareness that can help them in both reading and writing. In reading, for example, a sense of story can help children to predict and know what to expect, and to read with more awareness of cause

and effect, sequence, and other story factors related to comprehension (Kempler, 1986; Trabasso and Van Den Broek, 1985). In writing, children learn to apply such structures while telling their own stories and giving shape to their experiences. (Tway, 1985)

Perhaps storytelling's greatest value for a teacher is its effectiveness in fostering a relaxed and intimate atmosphere in the classroom. Scott (1985), an experienced Australian teacher/ storyteller, explains how this practical and general objective can relate to the other benefits from using storytelling: It can 1) introduce children to a range of story experiences; 2) provide young students with models of story patterns, themes, characters, and incidents to help them in their own writing, oral language, and thinking; 3) nurture and encourage a sense of humor in children; 4) help put children's own words in perspective; 5) increase knowledge and understanding of other places, races, and beliefs; 6) introduce new ideas and be used to question established concepts without threat to the individual; 7) lead to discussions that are far ranging and often more satisfying than those arising from formal lessons; and 8) serve as the most painless way of teaching children to listen, to concentrate, and to follow the thread and logic of an argument.

SOME AIDS FOR EFFECTIVE STORYTELLING

To build children's storytelling skills, Plourde (1985) recommends activities that focus on role playing, generating character, helping students find an appropriate voice, and developing the ability to make logical conclusions. Plourde elaborates on a dozen techniques appropriate for children in kindergarten through grade 6. One, for example, has the teacher or one child relate the beginning of a familiar fairy tale and another child make up an entirely new ending.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (1984) offers several suggestions for making low-cost crafts materials that facilitate storytelling. Among them is the construction of a simple mini-cinema illustrating sequential events of a story. These stages of the story may then be presented with a flexible strip of drawings operated by pulling a string.

Gross and Batchelder (1986) present exercises for older elementary and middle school students designed to improve group dynamics and create a learning environment for storytelling. One technique involves using a circle to practice games inspired by modern dance education and native American rituals. These exercises help older students who are apt to be self conscious to become more confident, willing to participate, and supportive of the storytelling process.

Music--classical or popular, recorded or live--can also be used to set the scene for storytelling, as can puppets and other simple props. (Sidorsky, 1985) But effective storytelling is a versatile strategy that stirs the imagination and enables children to visualize with few or no visual aids at all.

THE CLASSROOM TEACHER AS STORYTELLER

For a classroom teacher who wishes to use storytelling, it is best to begin by choosing a simple story with only a few characters and an uncomplicated plot. The story should have action, the plot should be understandable to the listeners, and the events of the story should have a definite climax that leads to a conclusion the students will find satisfactory.

Folk and fairy tales are the easiest kinds of stories for beginning storytellers to communicate (Ramey, 1986; Taub, 1984). In selecting these or any story, it is important to keep in mind the age of the children in the audience. Scott (1985) advises the storyteller to be flexible, to expect unexpected reactions, and to remember that enjoyment the first and chief consideration.

Scott and other researchers (e.g., Ramey, 1986) emphasize that a storyteller need not be a "performer," but rather a person who has good memory and listening skills, who sincerely likes the story chosen for telling, and who knows the story so well that it can be recreated for an audience without any uncertainty or panic. Storytellers who are too "actorish" usually fascinate the audience, but at the expense of the story.

The second consideration in effective storytelling should be to encourage exploration and experimentation with language (Schwartz, 1987). Constructing meaning through use of language is an implicit goal in storytelling. A language development focus can recommend retelling. Stories that are told and retold develop a patina with each new telling. Children's participation in storytelling provides not only novelty to stimulate the child's curiosity, but also enough familiarity to allow a child to perceive relationships and to experience success at using language (Wason-Ellam, 1986).

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