



WHAT CAN LIBRARIANS LEARN FROM
ELMO, SID, AND DORA?

APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF
EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION TO STORYTIME



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“Lalalala, Elmo’s world. Lalalala, Elmo’s world...” Like numerous children, you probably learned this song, along with a whole host of other interesting things, from *Sesame Street*. Since its first airing in 1969, the overarching goal of the show has been to prepare young children for formal schooling, and numerous research studies (Fisch and Truglio 2001) confirm that the producers of the show accomplish that goal. With the great success of *Sesame Street*, other producers and television networks have also developed programs intended to boost the cognitive and social development of children. Learning and school readiness are at the heart of educational television. Yet many, if not all, of the best-known educational television shows produced for children are not just educational; they’re also humorous, engaging, and interactive.

Parents and caregivers can maximize children’s engagement with educational television programming by co-viewing and discussing concepts and issues during and following episodes, and parents and caregivers can poach ideas and processes from these programs and apply them to their own interactions with children. School librarians might also consider taking a few pages from the educational television playbook and applying them to storytime. Though in this article we focus primarily on younger students, shared reading-aloud sessions with older students—who can themselves be presenters—can effectively incorporate many of these same strategies.

General Benefits of Educational Television Programming to Integrate into Storytime Programming

Problem Solving

Children meet challenges every day in a variety of different contexts,

and many educational television shows such as *PAW Patrol* on Nick Jr. provide great examples of problem solving. Problems for children range in difficulty according to the situation and task. Problems can be as simple as trying to reach a plate of cookies on the counter, moderately more difficult such as attempting to safely cross a busy street, or as complex as trying to understand laws of physics. When children see others successfully tackle problems, they are able to learn from those situations. Many educational television programs encourage children to solve hypothetical problems, and sharing in these problem-solving experiences helps children select appropriate tools and develop confidence germane to real-world situations. Skills developed through virtual exploration can be applied to resolve actual problems encountered in everyday life.

Problem-solving tasks can and should be incorporated into everyday interactions with young children. Encouraging young children to predict upcoming events during book reading or as an event unfolds in real time is a proven method for supporting the development of problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. One fun and engaging method for scaffolding the development of prediction, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills is to incorporate in shared reading a multiple-choice format, like those found in shows such as *Ruff-Ruff, Tweet and Dave*, and *Dora the Explorer*. For example, “If the dog buries the bone in the garden, will he: a) make birds angry, b) turn purple, or c) damage the flowers?”

To help children develop strategies for thinking through and solving problems, adults can also harness those teachable moments that

naturally occur during children’s play. For example, if two children want the same manipulative during a creative-interpretation activity, a school librarian could take time to discuss the situation with the children involved, as well as with those on the sidelines, and together develop possible solutions.

General Foundational Concepts

General foundational concepts are those basic understandings that children need to perform everyday tasks and to be ready for formal schooling. Colors, numbers, shapes, time, and quantities are all examples of foundational concepts. Many educational television shows, including *Peg + Cat* on PBS, incorporate a variety of foundational concepts. Similarly, school librarians can select books that incorporate these concepts. Additionally, librarians should intentionally weave foundational concepts into general storytime routines and communications. For example, ordinal terms can be used to describe storytime procedures, e.g., first, we will..., second, etc. Finally, foundational concepts are easily incorporated into planned library program activities and storytime crafts.

World Knowledge

Children need some background knowledge on a whole host of topics and events to support later learning and reading comprehension. As Susan Neuman has so eloquently stated, “Children are natural knowledge seekers. Whether it’s orca whales, dinosaurs, or the latest technological doodad, children’s activities are often guided by their need to know. They want to become expert in a domain. And it’s this goal that drives their ambition” (2010, 301). When children have a basic understanding of science and social studies concepts, they

have the requisite foundation for more-detailed learning and for pursuing unique individualized interests. These foundational understandings of social studies and science concepts, such as land forms, scientific classification systems, cultural traditions, weather systems, history, and so much more, facilitate later academic endeavors and reading comprehension.

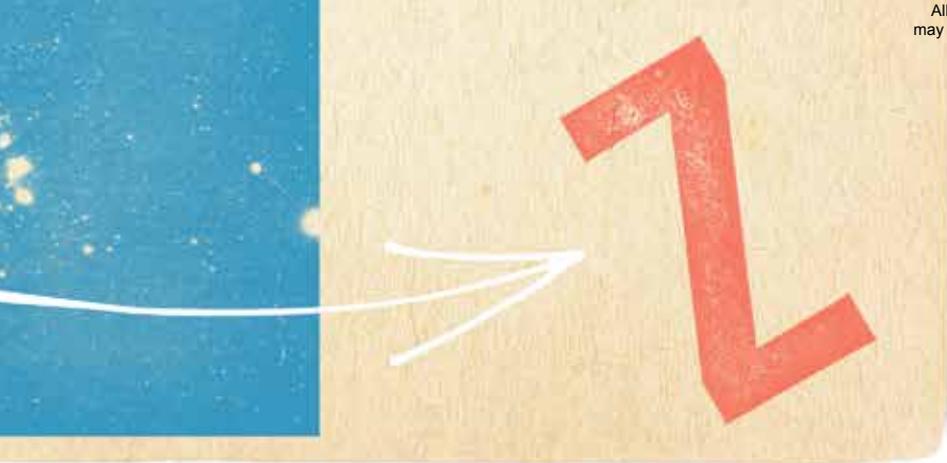
Educational television programs for children have been incorporating naturally interesting topics into episodes for years. Take, for example, the content and characters of PBS's *Cyberchase*, *Sid the Science Kid*, and *Wild Kratts*, as well as newer programs like Nick Jr.'s *Blaze and the Monster Machines*, Disney Junior's *Miles from Tomorrow Land*, and *Fishtronaut*, which is available on Netflix. Rather than sticking to traditional early-childhood themes such as teddy bears, apples, and pets, school librarians can broaden storytime program themes to those that are more eccentric and naturally interesting, and, thereby, expand the knowledge base of young children. Topics such as jungles, amphibians, natural disasters, and other less-mainstream subjects will expand children's interests and repertoire of stories and information. Incorporation of cultural themes, customs, and an intentional focus on diversity like that found in Sprout's *Super Wings* or Disney Junior's *Handy Manny* will help prepare children for success in the twenty-first century.

Literacy-Specific Benefits of Educational Television Applicable to Storytime

Educational television programming supports both foundational and less-constrained reading skills (Parris 2005). To be school-ready, children need finite skills such as letter-name and letter-

After reading, the librarian can discuss the story, being sure to incorporate the vocabulary words into the discussion. Even more beneficial, the librarian can structure the discussion so that the children themselves will be speaking the word as part of the discussion. This technique is effective with learners of all ages!





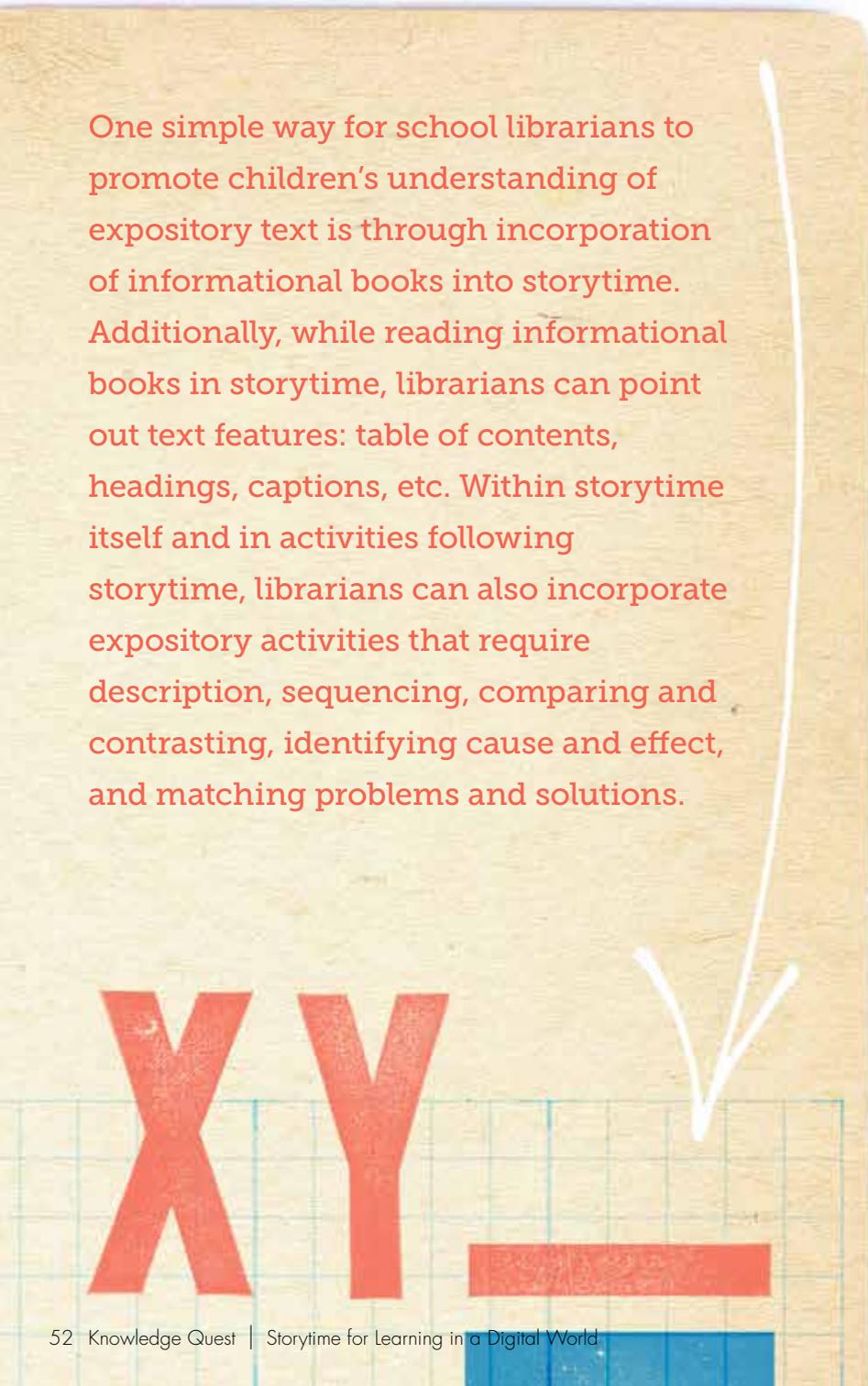
sound knowledge, as well as broad exposure to language, ideas, and experiences that support vocabulary development and comprehension of complex storylines, arguments, and information.

Letter-Name, Letter-Sound, and Phonological Awareness

The alphabetic principle, recognition that print letters represent sounds that are combined to form words, is a key understanding for early reading success. Many educational television shows concentrate on supporting children's letter-name and letter-sound skills. Programs such as *Sesame Street* and *Between the Lions* are well respected for focusing on letter concepts, and newer programs such as *Wallykazam!* also draw viewers' attention to letters and their corresponding sounds. Through intentional selection of books, songs, and rhymes, school librarians can integrate a focus on letter names and letter sounds into storytime. Even more effective are activities that are personalized based on children's interests. For example, librarians can use the names of the children as the entry points for letter awareness. In addition, librarians should encourage caregivers to personalize letter-name and letter-sound activities for the children in their care.

Many educational television programs also help advance young children's phonological awareness. Studies (e.g., Goswami 2001) suggest that the more language children hear, the better able they are to differentiate individual sounds in words. Children's phonological awareness can be further enhanced when their attention is explicitly directed to identifying, segmenting, and/or blending the phonemes within

One simple way for school librarians to promote children's understanding of expository text is through incorporation of informational books into storytime. Additionally, while reading informational books in storytime, librarians can point out text features: table of contents, headings, captions, etc. Within storytime itself and in activities following storytime, librarians can also incorporate expository activities that require description, sequencing, comparing and contrasting, identifying cause and effect, and matching problems and solutions.



words. Attention to the individual phonemes within words through language play occurs regularly in many educational television programs. Fun phrases such as “Meeska, Mooska, Mickey Mouse!” (Walt Disney Television Animation 2006) are peppered throughout most programs aimed at young children. The more children are attuned to recognize the different and unique sounds of words, the more phonemically aware and capable—and, in turn, the better equipped for beginning reading and writing—they become.

School librarians can integrate wordplay into storytime routines. Songs, fingerplays, chants, and action rhymes are natural entrees into phonological awareness. Inclusion of simple language play and games that promote segmentation, blending, and identification of phonemes are more intentional ways to further enhance children’s attention to phonemes within and across different words (Reutzel 2015). Librarians might consider songs like *Willoughby, Wallaby, Woo* or the *Banana Nana Bo Bana* (the Name Game) chant as personalized methods to promote phonemic awareness.

Print Concepts

The term “concepts of print” refers to children’s knowledge of print conventions: written words symbolize spoken words; English words are read from left to right; books in English are read from front to back; books have titles, authors, and illustrators, etc. Many educational television shows such as *WordWorld* on PBS promote concepts of print through the pairing of written text with spoken words. Other programs integrate word formation, word reading, and sentence building to convey the

concept that words and sentences are read from left to right. For example, on the PBS show *Super Why!* Princess Presto possesses spelling power. As she waves her wand from the left side of the screen to the right in the title sequence, the word, “spelling” synchronously forms above her head. Librarians can also take simple measures to further advance children’s print understandings. For example, many school librarians point to the printed words while reading. Librarians can also draw children’s attention to text features such as speech bubbles, headings, and picture captions—especially easy to do when projecting an e-book. Finally, talking about parts of hardcopy books (e.g., cover, spine, title page, etc.) will help children develop this context-specific vocabulary.

Oral Language Development

Well-developed oral language skills in early childhood promote later literacy proficiency and heightened general cognitive development during the schooling years (Cunningham and Stanovich 1997). The more language interactions children have, the better developed their language skills. Oral language is particularly important because children need guided practice expressing and fine-tuning language.

Research (Hart and Risley 1995, 2003) suggests that by age three children from families on welfare hear about thirty million fewer words than children from families with parents employed in professional positions. Hence, the contributions to oral language provided through out-of-home experiences are particularly important for at-risk children. Vocabulary, one component of oral language, can be easily enhanced through storytime.

Vocabulary

Educational television promotes children’s vocabulary development through incorporation of less-frequently heard and complex words. Additionally, television programs commonly pair those target words with actions or images and contextual definitions. For example, in one episode of the classic *Blue’s Clues* (the episode titled “Blue’s Wishes”), Blue illustrates the clue: “glide.” In the segment, Blue’s paw moves back and forth. The character Joey states, “Our third clue is sliding back and forth”—pairing a contextual definition with the action. He then states the word, “gliding.” As the show continues, the words “gliding,” “glide,” and “glides” are paired with movement or action nine more times within two minutes.

In storytime it is also fairly easy to pair interesting vocabulary with action and images to pair words with simple, contextual definitions, and to repeat their use. Before reading a story that contains some words new to the listeners, a school librarian can discuss one or two of those words, pairing them with images (in the book or projected from other sources) and/or action. When encountering the word during the reading, the librarian can provide a little refresher definition or invite the children to apply the meaning in the context of the story. After reading, the librarian can discuss the story, being sure to incorporate the vocabulary words into the discussion. Even more beneficial, the librarian can structure the discussion so that the children themselves will be speaking the word as part of the discussion. This technique is effective with learners of all ages!

Text Structure

Though at first glance book reading and television viewing seem diametrically opposed, educational television can promote children's understanding of text structure, both narrative and expository. Whether informational or fictional, the structure or organization of material within a text is either narrative or expository. Those books and television programs told in story format have narrative structures, while those that relay information through description, sequence, compare/contrast, cause/effect, procedure, or problem/solution like *Sesame Street* segments of *Elmo's World*, have expository structures.

Children's understanding of the narrative structure enables them to devote greater attention to comprehension, vocabulary learning, and their understanding of concepts and world knowledge during storybook readings. Within and in conjunction with storytime, school librarians can further support children's understandings of narrative structure. First, it's important to engage in dialogic reading with discussion of each book throughout and following the reading. Narrative understanding can be advanced through explicit discussion of the beginning, middle, and ending components of the story. Interactive retellings with flannel boards, students' reenactments, and other creative play also foster understanding of narrative structure.

Young children also need exposure to and an understanding of expository text structures. Because of the human affinity for storytelling coupled with the fact that parents, teachers, and other adults such as librarians tend to read many more narrative than

expository books to young children (Duke 2000), children become more familiar with narrative language structures than expository. However, familiarity with expository text structures is particularly important because most in-school reading in later grades and reading in adulthood (e.g., newspapers, e-mails, text messages, work memos, healthcare information, etc.) consist of expository text. One simple way for school librarians to promote children's understanding of expository text is through incorporation of informational books into storytime. Additionally, while reading informational books in storytime, librarians can point out text features: table of contents, headings, captions, etc. Within storytime itself and in activities following storytime, librarians can also incorporate expository activities that require description, sequencing, comparing and contrasting, identifying cause and effect, and matching problems and solutions.

Insights about the Learning Environment Drawn from Educational Television

Motivation and Comprehension

Children's fascination with and active participation during educational television programming give testament to the motivational features associated with it. One lesson readily drawn from educational television and applied to storytime is the importance of keeping a focus on fun and enjoyment!

Studies of educational television suggest that attention and comprehension are strongly related: the more content children are able to comprehend, the greater attention they are willing to expend, and the greater the attention

expended, the more the viewer will comprehend (Anderson and Kirkorian 2006). Consequently, good educational television shows incorporate strategies to capture attention and to facilitate comprehension. These same strategies can be modified for storytime.

Spark Curiosity

Children are naturally curious and want to learn about the world around them. Educational television programs for children typically open with scenes that grab viewers' attention to draw them into the storyline or whet their appetite for learning. School librarians can also use educational hooks to interest young children. Consider how an image or a prop might be used to garner attention about a topic. For example, a librarian might use actual (or silk) chrysanthemums, roses, and lilies to attract the attention of young children. The librarian might prompt the children to consider how the objects are similar and different, whether the props are living or nonliving, how or why people might use them, etc. Consider how this hook might provide a perfect segue into a reading of Kevin Henkes' *Chrysanthemum* in conjunction with a "names" themed storytime.

Instructional Previews and Concluding Wrap-Up

Children, like adults, enjoy achievement and mastery; therefore, the likelihood of their engagement in an activity increases with their success in or understanding of that activity. Adults can and should set children up to succeed through structural components that build on the children's existing knowledge and strengths. Consider how educational programming for young children subtly activates

prior knowledge while also preparing viewers for what is to come. Programs like *Dora the Explorer* and *Thomas and Friends* structure these previews through maps, *The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* previews the “Mouseketools” or objects that will be used to complete an adventure or solve problems, and a librarian can use this strategy as well by creating a visually enhanced storytime progression chart or agenda and then revisiting it at each transition: first, we investigated snails, and then we had fun with our opening song; next, we’ll read _____, etc. Viewers of the long-running *Barney and Friends* will recall that Barney concluded each programming with “Barney Says” in which he narrated, with accompanying visual clues, each major action or event of the episode. Librarians can incorporate this concluding routine in storytime or encourage parents to do so individually with their children.

Repetition

Another technique for boosting success, which, in turn, enhances enjoyment and furthers learning, is repetition. Television programming for children employs multiple forms of repetition, and storytime programs for children can also. Many television programs use recurring characters and replicate components across episodes to form a structure. For example, in every episode of the classic *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Mr. Rogers changes out of his jacket and dress shoes into a sweater and blue sneakers, and a trolley ushers viewers into the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Similarly, *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood*, a spinoff of *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, has two different but related stories in each episode. A song that is introduced in the first story of each episode is then repeated in the second story of the same episode. School librarians also employ

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recurring elements across storytime programs. For example, many librarians use the same structure each week for storytime, often beginning with an opening routine or song, varying regular elements such as book reading and action rhymes, and a standard closing.

Repetition is also used within single episodes and single stories within episodes of children's television programs, primarily as a method for teaching and reinforcing moderately complex concepts and vocabulary. For example, in the "Caillou the Builder" episode of the program *Caillou*, the main character and his mother discuss the meaning of "detour" when they encounter a fallen tree in their route to preschool. Later in that same episode, the preschool boy explains the meaning of detour to his friends as he constructs a detour around a tree in the sandbox. Advanced concepts and vocabulary can be repeated throughout and across storytimes through book selection, planned activities, and discussions. School librarians can also encourage parents to build on the ideas and repeat the terms in interactions and discussion with their children beyond the library.

Interaction and Sufficient Think Time

Nickelodeon's groundbreaking and award-winning *Blue's Clues* first introduced the "learning by doing" concept into the television viewing context, and many programs produced for children have since copied the technique. Characters in many children's productions address questions or issue invitations to viewers and then provide time for response. For example, the central character in *Special Agent Oso* regularly faces directly toward the viewer, asks for assistance in making a choice, waits several seconds, and then continues

action. School librarians are expert dialogic readers and understand the value of interacting with children during book sharing. Interaction can be also integrated into other components of storytime. For example, children can participate in story retellings by placing and moving flannel-board pieces. When engaging in dialogic reading, inviting children to volunteer, and leading question/response exchanges, librarians should be sure to provide a three- to five-second think-time pause to allow all children sufficient time to consider the issue and respond. At a Family Night event school librarians can increase the number of active participants by inviting each child to respond to the accompanying adult rather than directly to the librarian.

First Steps for Incorporating Literacy and Learning Concepts into Storytime Structures

The cornerstone of good educational programming and the first and most important idea to integrate into storytime is the fact that children are more receptive to learning when they are having fun and are actively engaged. School librarians make storytime fun for young students through interesting book choices, incorporation of movement activities such as finger plays and action rhymes, integration of music, and cheerful dispositions. All except finger plays are effective with older students, too!

We encourage you to consider how you can apply lessons learned from educational TV to storytime at your school library. Consider, too, how older students can be engaged in storytimes (traditional and digital) for peers and for younger students.



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