

Tell me a Story: Celebrating the Art of Storytelling

Huddled children, expectant faces, a hush descends. The magic is about to begin...

The need to create and share a story is an essential part of being human. It is one of the oldest forms of communication and exists in every culture. Folk and fairytales, myths and legends, parables and personal stories all serve to explain the great unknown, to satisfy curiosities, to educate, to fulfil the desire for entertainment or the need to perpetuate a heroic past. Thus the earliest storytellers were historians, news-bearers, dispersers of culture, entertainers as well as upholders of morals and religious faith. Throughout history stories have been used for sacred rites, for healing and for teaching. Today's storytellers will tell you that story is still at the very heart of teaching and learning.

Despite our sophisticated technological age story is still part of day to day life in Australia. Whenever social groups meet there is the passing on of 'newsworthy' stories in factual or anecdotal form. We still love a good gossip. For Aboriginal people the spiritual significance of their culture is centred in story and for white Australians their diverse cultural heritage brings a richness of folktale, myth and legend which has been locally adapted to create a new sense of identity.

In terms of education, storytelling is a form of mutual creation, a rare mixing of mind and emotion, where learning in all subject areas can be enhanced. The storyteller paints a visual image to fire the imagination of their listeners and helps them to create their own internal images. A wondrous relationship develops between the student and storyteller, one based on mutual understanding and trust. It has been described by Berice Dudley, an experienced Sydney storyteller, as 'synchronicity of the minds' – where storyteller and listener are on the same wavelength (personal conversation, 2000). Having the confidence in the person who tells you stories and a mental link with them is a wonderful springboard for learning.

Helen McKay (1997) describes it as such:

To me storytelling is a measure of magic shared between the teller and the audience. It is a meeting of minds where visions, values, feelings and memories are passed on in words. Storytellers send out words showing their vision and receive feedback from their listeners in the form of body language. When this connection works a special form of energy is present – I call it magic.

Each listener's experience is unique and each will have a different perception of the storytelling performance. Both the teller and the listener bring their individual personalities, emotions, insights and receptiveness to create that special magic as stories are brought to life. Where one listener might visualise the scenery another might focus on a task or problem at hand but each can use

storytelling as a vehicle for making sense of their world and discovering who they are.

Storytellers work with words. In this way the listener is exposed to the richness of language – the sounds, the rhythm, the structure. Children learn that words have power – the power to develop a mood, create an image or evoke an emotion. It also exposes them to a large variety in language and extends their linguistic knowledge. Things such as chants or refrains, puns, archaic expressions, unfamiliar words, unique words and phrases, and tongue twisters all extend vocabulary and linguistic competence. Children will find it empowering to be able to express their thoughts and feelings articulately through oral language.

To be a good communicator is vital for success in academic, professional and social situations. Through listening to a storyteller children can learn about the following essential speaking skills:

- articulation, prosody, volume and rate;
- the organisation and sequencing of ideas;
- how to choose language appropriate to the context – be it a topic, an audience or a particular purpose;
- non-verbal cues such as facial expression, posture or movements which add to meaning;
- how to pick up on signs of confusion or misunderstanding in the listener and;
- how to clarify details or points if necessary.

Of course, listening skills are also enhanced by storytelling. The child is given the opportunity to develop the art of listening, often without interruption from question or discussion. Sustained listening helps the child to 1) hear the words 2) derive meaning from the words 3) follow sequences of ideas and 4) draw inferences to interpret the story. Thus comprehension can be enhanced at the literal, inferential and critical thinking levels. Stories that have riddles or problems to solve are particularly helpful in enhancing creative/critical thinking skills.

Listening to stories can pave the way for children to progress to reading on their own. Having been exposed to books from kindergarten onwards, a storyteller extends the experience of the printed word so that children can 'hear' how a printed word 'sounds.' Suddenly the words in print have a vitality, colour, drama and movement of their own.

Cooper, Colling and Saxby (1994) discuss that hearing a story prior to reading it helps the child to develop predictive or word attack skills based on their prior story knowledge. The storyteller can inspire children to turn to books as they search for a particular story in text form. Baker and Greene (1977) say that storytelling brings stories to children who do not yet have the reading skills but are ready for the literacy experience, or 'hook' the reluctant reader by exposing them to a more varied literary experience than they would otherwise seek for themselves.

Writing skills are also enhanced by storytelling. By listening to tongue twisters, rhyming words, etc. phonological awareness develops – a crucial prerequisite for the sound-symbol relationships necessary for early spelling and writing (Phillips 2000). By becoming aware of syntactic and organisational structure children have a framework in which to compose their own stories. They will also learn about literary devices such as character, setting, plot, style or genre, point of view, dialogue, theme etc.

Storytelling gives children insight into human experience and patterns of behaviour. Through story and their innate ability to create story through play, children bring order to their world, trying on roles as they search for their own personal identity, attempting to make sense of their world and the world of others. They begin to develop an understanding of the universality of communities – human motives, values, conflicts and frailties, and are able to empathise more with others. There has been concern by some educators that for today's children affective development has been sacrificed to the importance placed on cognitive development and that the vital social skills for functioning in a community are being compromised (Zipes 1995).

Storytelling helps a student to keep alive their cultural heritage and to understand and appreciate those cultures different to their own. 'It is akin to the folk dance and folk song in preserving the traditions of a country' (Baker and Greene 1977, p23).

Storytelling is proof of the commonality of people – the oneness of human beings. It exists in every culture and transcends place and time. Similar stories can be found in various nations although the form may be changed to reflect the culture in which they developed. Maurice Saxby (1979) reports that there are 'no less than 345 variants of the Cinderella theme, extending throughout Europe, Asia, and America, and even into the lore of the Eskimos' (p74). These stories share a universal truth and wisdom with which all children can identify.

One of the best reasons of all for telling stories is that it is such a pleasurable and sharing experience. It brings the listener a sense of wonder, a mystery and a reverence for life and learning. It creates a relaxed atmosphere in which to learn and can be used in all subjects across the curriculum. Children will make more sense of the course content when they can relate to it via story.

Storytelling in the Classroom.

Storytelling is a wonderful learning tool in education. It can be incorporated into all subject areas and is accessible to children of all ages and abilities. It costs little to set up and requires no special equipment beyond imagination and the power of listening and speaking to create visual images. It can contribute to academic success through the development of listening/speaking and literacy skills as well as the emotional development and well-being of the individual as it nurtures them towards a greater understanding of themselves and others. This will flow on to success in interpersonal relationships and professional success.

In our technologically driven world children get minimal opportunities to: 1) enhance verbal communication skills which are vital to negotiation, conflict resolution, discussion, critical evaluation etc.; 2) develop their imaginations and empower them to go into new and inventive areas and; 3) learn the wisdom to participate in their adult community.

Some schools, such as the Rudolf Steiner schools, believe that storytelling is vital for learning and, in the early years, base their entire curriculum around story. Even subjects such as Maths and Science, History and Geography are taught through story.

In other instances, storytellers are invited into schools for a specific purpose. Threatening or unsettling real life events can be explored in a non-threatening and impersonal way through story. Donna Sife, an accredited Performing Artist with the NSW Department of Education and Training, is currently involved in a pilot program on child protection with the Police Department. Through storytelling she 'talks' to Year 4 students in some NSW schools to address the problems of domestic violence and bullying. She has also used story to help new migrant children to assimilate by telling stories about the experience of immigration to both the newcomers and Australian-born children. Helen McKay, Founder of the Australian Storytelling Guild (NSW) Inc., has used storytelling to inspire non-achieving gifted children. It has also been used successfully in the United States for children who are chronic procrastinators – those who are unable to act through their fear of not being perfect.

For the teacher who is a novice storyteller it would be well worth their while to delve into some of the excellent books that teach the art and craft of storytelling (Barton 1986; McKay and Dudley 1996; Cooper, Collins and Saxby 1994). These texts will guide you in how to choose your story, ways to maximise your interaction with your listening audience, problems to avoid and how, beginnings and endings, use of voice and body postures, props etc.

It is important to keep in mind that there are no rights and wrongs in storytelling – each teller must find their own unique voice and discover what works best for them. Keep in mind the objective is to create a visual image in the listener's mind. One of the easiest places to start for a teacher is to tell their own personal story or anecdote. This works well as a lead-in to the non-arts subjects such as maths and science as it establishes credibility and hooks audience interest. Helpful teacher resource/activity books are listed at the end of this article.

Conversely, you may focus on the storytelling skills of the children in your class. The storytelling activities you choose will depend on the age of your audience, and your purpose for telling the story.

Suggestions for helping children to develop their storytelling skills in years K-6.

Do some warm-up exercises.

- Tongue twisters prepare the voice and tongue.
- Body warm-ups such as head rolls, arm swings, stretches etc loosen up the body for storytelling and listening.

Explore traditional openings and endings.

- Once upon a time...
- Long, long ago there lived a king...
- There was once a poor widow...
- And they lived happily ever after.
- From that day on they were never parted.
- This is a true story.
- That's how it was, and that's how it is, and that's how it always will be.

Tell personal experiences or those of your family.

- My first day of school...
- How I got this scar...
- The scariest thing that ever happened to me...
- When my grandmother/grandfather was little she/he...

Tell a story from a different character's point of view.

- In Little Red Riding Hood the story can be told by the narrator, the child, the wolf, the grandmother or the woodcutter.

Use props to tell a simple story.

- wordless picture books
- hand puppets or shadow puppets
- favourite toy
- story gloves
- traditional dress to tell a folk tale from a variety of cultures

Explore and compare different categories of story.

- Fable
- Fairytale
- Folk tale
- Myth
- Legend
- Parable
- Tall tales
- Personal
- Religious
- Traditional eg. stories from the Dreamtime

Help with sequencing a story by using different strategies.

- story maps
- flow charts
- time lines
- murals
- story outlines

Explore and discuss the components of a story.

- character(s)
- setting (real, fantasy)
- time (past, present, future)
- the problem
- personality traits
- solutions

Story circles and story chains.

- One child starts a story and stops after 2-3 sentences. The next child takes over. The story can be made into a ghost story, mystery, love story, pirate story, horror story - whatever.

Ways to look at story. Stories can be:

- read
- retold
- summarised
- dissected
- compared
- created
- predicted
- problem solved
- rehearsed
- improvised
- embellished

Storytelling is one of the oldest human art forms. Stories hold the secrets of the universe. They help to explain our world and our place in it. Storytellers weave the fabric of our society and enable us to explore the emotional dark pockets of the psyche in a non-threatening way. For the listener this can be a primal experience - there is a purity as they succumb to the spell of 'Once upon a time,' knowing full well that they will be transported to a unique place – a place where feelings and emotions meet logic and reason and both will triumph. In brief, stories are good for the soul.

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Teacher Resource/Activity Books

- Cam, Philip. *Thinking Stories 1(and 2)*. Teacher Resource/Activity Book. *Philosophical Inquiry for Children Ages 8-12*. Hale & Iremonger, Sydney 1994.
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