

Dear Educator,

Greetings! Storytelling is a tool that can gain you entry into a child's heart and mind. Once there, the tale can teach, affirm, and even tickle the listener. As a Wheelock College graduate in early childhood development and faculty member at Leslie College's Arts Institute, I have had the privilege of utilizing storytelling in numerous educational environments, and I never cease to be amazed by its potential and power. If you would like to contemplate the cognitive, curricular, and social/emotional possibilities of storytelling, feel free to cyber-walk your way into my web site at *www.storiesalive.com* for articles on this subject.

Every summer during school recess, I teach a course along with Doug Lipman, a marvelous teller, teacher, and coach. *Telling Stories to Children* is held the last week in June (Mon.-Thur.) in Marblehead, Mass. For more information call, write, or e-mail me at the numbers and addresses below.

Included here are a number of activities designed to help students stay involved after our storytelling session. The activities are organized by developmental range and specific objectives. It is my hope that our work now spawns an ongoing love and practice of storytelling in your classroom.

Sincerely,

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Lower Elementary, Kindergarten through Grade 2**

Appreciating the Art Form

1. What Is Storytelling?

Ask your students if any of them have a “boo-boo” or injury and if they would like to tell the rest of the class how they got it. That student has just told a story! We tell stories all the time. Can students recall some of their favorite stories that are told in their homes? (I *a/ways* this exercise by saying that the story must have happened to themselves or a family member. Nothing from TV or films is acceptable.)

2. How Can You Make a Story More Interesting?

Read to your students a short fairy or folk tale that you know well. Once you have finished, retell the story without recourse to the book. All you need to know are the characters, the beginning, the end, and the sequence of events. Everything else is yours to create. If you become lost, ask your class what comes next. You will be surprised at how helpful they can be. Once you have finished, ask the students what changes they noticed between the story you *read* and the story you *told*. You will discover that many of the techniques of telling are natural adaptations to an audience. Students will discover these immediately. Write a list of their observations. Among them you will probably find the following:

*Eye Contact

*Use of the body to mirror moods

*Use of the voice to evoke emotions and characters.

Have students choose any one of these techniques to focus on while they retell the story in pairs or as a class, with each student telling a short segment.

3. Making Pictures in Your Head

Television, film, and videos have all contributed to a lack of invention on the part of children. Storytelling challenges their imaginations to work.

*Have students close their eyes and relax. Practice deep breathing, having students follow the path of their breath as they inhale: it enters the nose and travels down through the throat and chest cavity and enters the stomach. The exhale takes the same slow path but in reverse.

*Tell them to pretend their mind is a camera making a film of the story will be telling. Coach them to “see” objects in full detail, including colors, textures, sizes, and shapes. Ask them to note environmental details such as temperature, air density, odors, etc. Have them “look” carefully at the characters in the tale.

*Tell a short story.

*When you are finished, ask the students, without discussion, to draw a picture of a scene from the story. Compare and contrast the students’ images. One great joy of this exercise is that there are no incorrect answers. If the student took the time and effort to imagine the tale, then any details they depict are authentic. *They have each activated the imagination, a tool without which we cannot solve the problems of the future!*

4. Making Stories From Pictures

This process helps shape children’s skills as storytellers. Pass out a picture to each student. You should choose pictures that would interest the students. You might cut them from magazines and mount them on cardboard. Ask your students to look carefully at their picture, thinking about shapes, colors, textures, smells, characters, and actions. Then ask them to describe it for the rest of the class or group without looking at the picture. After 5 or 6 children have done this, display their pictures and see if the others can guess who was describing which one. You can repeat this exercise numerous times, asking students to add significant details each time. They will grow to appreciate how much can be conjured with careful choices of words.

5. An Evolving Art Form

Until the invention of the printing press, storytelling was the primary tool cultures had for

passing on news, information, life lessons, and history. In printed form, many stories have become static. Traditionally, however, stories were constantly evolving to reflect the needs and the world of those who told them. To demonstrate one aspect of this evolution, play telephone. Whisper a sentence into one student's ear and have her whisper it to the next student, and that one to the next, until the sentence has traveled around the classroom. Compare the initial sentence to the one last spoken. What has changed? This is much the same process that a folk tale experiences.

Preparing For Content

1. A Window to Another World

Jane Yolen, in her wonderful book about stories and storytelling, *Touch Magic*, describes the cultural possibilities of stories as "windows" to another world. You can gain an understanding of the language, rituals, values, and social structures of other cultures through their stories. If you ask me to share the tales of a particular culture, nationality, or religion with your class, you will want to prepare them by making other tales from this source available. A word of caution: Many writers use stories for their themes or because they provide a rich basis for clever prose or colorful characters. These stories are usually well written and often beautifully illustrated, but they are not necessarily a fair representation of the culture they claim to be drawn from. For example, I was looking through a collection of tales about strong women and found a story called, *How the Summer Queen Came to Canada*, that was said to be "A Canadian Indian Tale." This initial notation brought up a red flag for me, because all of my Native American friends have said they prefer to be addressed by their tribe of origin: "I am Algonquin," or, "I am Wampanoag." Thus, "Canadian Indian" struck me as blandly general. Within the story there were references to "the Rainbow Road," "Blob the Whale," and children with names such as "Sunshine," "Light," and "Flowers." All of these things struck me as both "cutsie" and unauthentic. Sure enough, when I called my friend, Joe Bruchac, a collector and teller of Abenaki tales, he confirmed my suspicions and sent me to an authentic source for a similar tale. If your objective is to teach about a culture, nationality, or religion through its stories, then look carefully for stories that are documented and truly representative.

How can you determine if a story actually represents the culture it comes from and was not completely reshaped as easy reading or listening for its target audience? There is no tried-and-true test for authenticity. The following are a few variables you might consider when choosing stories to represent cultures of origin:

*Does the author provide a foreword with information on how the stories were originated, collected, recorded, and translated? *Beware of general introductions that thanks all the people of world who inspired these tales.*

*Are names, places, and objects specific to the language and culture they represent? *Beware if the main character of an Iranian tale has the name "Fred!"*

*Does the author provide a glossary for the correct pronunciation of indigenous names, places, and objects along with necessary definitions? *Beware if a calabash is just called a gourd.*

*Do illustrations reflect the idiosyncrasies of the culture they are said to depict? *Beware if the heroine of a West African story has long, straight, blond hair.*

Stories can provide beautiful, effective windows to the worlds of others, but the glass must be clear and clean.

2. Social/Emotional Issues

Stories can help students identify social and emotional issues and offer a model for coping with problems. They can also provide a means by which students can achieve a sense of well-being. If you have chosen stories around a specific developmental issue, then flesh it out with your students prior to our session. For instance, if sibling rivalry is the topic, ask students, "Who has a younger brother or sister?" You might ask what is the hardest

part about being a big brother or sister and have them draw pictures of their whole family. The objective is to bring thinking about siblings to the surface so students will be receptive to these stories when they are presented.

Follow-Up Activities

1. Social/Emotional Objectives

After our session, follow-up can take on a number of forms:

*You can ask students for a general response to the material.

*You can ask students to put themselves in the place of the hero or heroine of the story.

“What would you have done in that situation?”

*Eric Erickson has shown us that children develop from one social/emotional stage to the next. How can you use the stories to entice children to challenge their beliefs and to press them forward to the next stage? In the story, *Dumb Baby*, Jamil begins as a child who is angry and competitive whenever he thinks of his baby sister. By the story’s end he is identifying with the parenting role. Instead of competing with the infant, he is proudly helping their mother to care for her. You could use this model to help your students express their real feelings, and then discuss the implications of different courses of action they could take. Ultimately, the students will appreciate their own skills and maturity in deciding what to do.

2. Follow-up Activities to Reinforce Cognitive Growth and Development

Sequencing

Choose a story which the students have already heard and, prior to any discussion, ask students to draw a picture of their favorite scene from this tale. Once completed, using the chalk ridge at the bottom of your board as support for the drawings, have students help you put the pictures in a sequence. Possible questions:

“Did this happen in the beginning, middle, or end of the story?”

“Which came first? this scene or that scene?”

“Which of these pictures would make a better ending?”

“Are any characters or actions missing? Who is willing to draw those for us?”

Once you have a full set of scenes and children can retell the story from them, you may add captions to the pictures and make a picture book from them. You may also use the class’s display as a model for each student to create her or his own full and individualized picture story.

Recall

In the above exercise you have children retelling the tale using the sequence of pictures they have created. A slightly more sophisticated exercise would have students sitting in a circle retelling the story. Each person progresses the tale by a few sentences or a scene and then passes the teller’s mantle to the next person in the circle. This is not a test. If a student is stymied by the sequence, others can chime in, helping to recreate the whole tale. You can repeat this same process in smaller circles and then teams of two or three, requiring each student to recall more of the tale with each retelling.

Grouping

One might think that folklore was created with this pre-concrete operational learning skill in mind. Stories almost always take place in a specific natural environment to which other details adapt. Papa Annoucie is a famous trickster who lives in West Africa. He must run through high grasses on his adventures to outwit a giant leopard, an elephant, or killer wasps. What would happen if he were visiting New York City? Running away down West 42nd street, trying to escape his nemesis, would he be in high grasses? Who would he be tricking in New York City? Leopard doesn’t live there. Who does? By changing the location you create a wonderful grouping exercise. Also, many folk tales have a talisman

given to the hero or heroine that later turns into an amplification of itself. A stone turns into a mountain. A shell turns into a lake. A nut turns into a forest. You can create a grouping exercise by changing the small object. If a nut turns into a forest, what would an ice cube turn into? These types of grouping exercises are provocative because they are motivated by the plot and the students' involvement. You'll be pleased and surprised just how effortless the learning becomes.

Creative Growth and Development

Your students' creative side has been expressed in the pictures they conjured in their minds and drew for you in the sequencing exercise. There are additional exercises you can use to extend the use of their imaginations via story.

Young children can best be served by a clear framework within which to use their creative powers. In simple parlance this is called "play." There are many ways of extending their play in the classroom while simultaneously meeting cognitive and developmental objectives.

*Line their sequenced pictures from a story on the wall in a dramatic play area and add a few appropriate props. In no time they will be reenacting the tale.

*Have children move in an open space to the rhythmic beat of a drum. Before any extensive work, set the boundaries of this game.

*Make boundaries for the movement space.

*Announce that students must travel into "open space." "Open Space" is anyplace in the designated area where another child is not. (I give a "time-out" to the first child who bumps into someone else on purpose. This sets a clear tone and expectation for behavior and control.)

*Children may take one step for each beat of the drum. Play with speeding up and slowing down the rhythm while they travel to it.

*Use a single loud beat as a "freeze" sign.

*Play with traveling at various speeds and freezing at different times.

In as much as the children are still primarily sensori-motor learners, the simultaneous control and freedom involved in this exercise keeps them completely involved and provides a basis for a great deal of learning.

Choose from the following variations on this exercise depending upon your specific objectives.

*Shapes

You can coach students to travel in specific shapes that you are studying. "Can you travel in 'round' way? In a 'square' way?"

*Animals

You can coach children to travel like animals you are studying. "Imagine your long elephant trunk. How does that change the way your head moves when you travel?"

*Heights

To help students use space and imagine it fully, coach them to travel at different heights. "How can you travel at a low level? Which part of your body becomes your base of support? Good, I see someone moving in a low level, elbows-first way. There is someone moving in a rolling, very low-level way."

*Feelings

Often you will be sharing a story that has a specific emotional component. You can bring this to the surface, so that the children are more receptive to it, by having them move in this feeling. "I am beating the drum slowly because I want you to move in sad ways. How do your legs feel when something sad has happened? Your arms? Your head? Keep moving but know that your whole body is sad." You can coach them through any feeling, and as you do, give examples of what possibly provoked the emotion. "Are you happy or what! You just got an A in your toughest subject. How does that feel in your feet? In your fingers? You want to get home to tell everyone. How do you move?"

As long as they keep up with the signals you are sending from the drum and maintain

movement in their own spaces, they are succeeding. After any of these exercises, the participants will not only have a deeper understanding of the concept which was depicted in the movements, but will also discover new vocabulary to describe the experience.

Upper Elementary

Appreciating the Art Form

The Oral Tradition

1. Stories have been passed down from one generation to the next for centuries. They were repeatedly reshaped for those who were listening by those who told them. With the advent of the printing press many of these tales became ossified. There is no single correct version of a folk or fairy tale. To understand this, have students read 4 or 5 versions of the same folk or fairy tale. The easiest to find are the traditional stories many of us heard as children: *Snow White*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Rapanzel*. The *Walt Disney* versions of these stories are good, but make sure you find other versions, such as the older Grimm Brothers versions, Perrault's French versions, and contemporary rewritings.

After reading the different versions, ask your class what all the versions shared. Ask what details differed. Ask why they think the "reteller" of the tale choose to retain some details and not others? This process of picking, choosing, and creating details anew is the folk process.

If you were telling this tale, knowing that your young listeners will identify with the hero or heroine, which details would you include and which would you leave out? Why?

2. The themes and motifs of most traditional folk and fairy tales resonate throughout human experience. Bruno Bettelheim, in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, hypothesizes that fairy tales are the externalization of internal, psychological states. Thus, *Jack and the Beanstalk* is not about one lazy boy who gets swindled and ends up killing a giant. Rather, it is a reflection of the Oedipal complex. The giant's wife (warm, sweet mother) rejects Jack (child) when the evil giant (father) comes home. Jack (the son) kills the giant (father figure) thus living out his destiny (psychological need) and returns to his earthly home (emerges from the fantasy having purged those feelings). This theory starts to make sense when you begin to see that the same themes appear in stories by peoples who had no knowledge of each other's cultures. These themes are shared characteristics that bind us across racial, religious, national, and ethnic divides.

Help your students find 4 or 5 stories from *different cultures* that reflect the *same theme or motif*. You can ask your librarian to help you investigate and decipher the "Motif Index," which is carried by most libraries, or you can simply sample the collections of folk and fairy tales. For instance, "evil stepmother tries to hinder or kill adopted daughter" is a theme in stories from the Native Americans, the peoples of Africa, Haiti, Norway, Germany, and a half-dozen other countries. "The third *idiot* son wins the princess with a good heart" is a common motif that crosses many cultural borders. Other universal themes include, "A kind heart wins over beauty and cunning," and "because of a greedy heart, a human who is given supernatural powers, ends up back in original poverty." Scan folk tales from many lands, choose a specific motif that you think your students would be drawn to, and then look for it in stories from 4 or 5 cultures. There are many themes; enjoy how they are reflected through the lens of a specific culture. As a class:

*List the stories and the cultures from which they emerged. (Refer to the section, *Preparing*

for Content: *A Window into another World*, for a discussion of stories that reflect their originating cultures.)

*Note what the stories have in common.

*Note what is unique about each tale.

*Ask students why they think this story motif exists in so many versions.

The Fine Art of Storytelling

*Ask one child to read a story, and then tell it in her or his own words.

*Ask the audience what skills would help someone be a good storyteller, and list their responses.

*Have students work in teams of 2-5. They should begin by retelling the story, each person taking on a portion of it, then passing the mantle on until the entire tale is retold.

*Students should choose one or two techniques from the skills list they just created and rework their story circle, with each person focusing on a different skill during their sharing time.

*If time allows, do it again, with each student choosing a different skill.

*Have each team share its version of the story with the entire class.

Preparing for Content

The program for your school will have been planned in advance. Before the telling of the story, you need to think through what knowledge or experience is essential for your students to appreciate the story. I have created specific curriculum guides for many of the American history stories. These are available on request.

Follow-up Activities

Language Arts

1. Developing Character

Good literature and stories are often character-driven. This idea runs counter to our media-culture in which heroes cliché and not complex (Super heroes, Super villains, Super supers!). Stories are a good tool to get students thinking about character and how human idiosyncrasies often motivate plot.

Have students choose a single character from one of the stories.

*Note all of this character's major and minor actions and behaviors.

*What does his/her behavior tell you about the character?

For instance, in the story, "Hell for a Picnic," E. Michael Tarney

*Was left by his father in an orphanage when he was three years old.

*Goes to sea to find his father.

*Trusts those he meets.

*Is ashamed of his leg.

*Tries to hide the fact that his leg is "gimpy."

This list will go on, but the point is that plot must come from the authenticity of the character.

*Given your understanding of this character, what would he or she do if:

*He or she saw someone drowning?

*He or she found money on the ground?

*He or she had a crush on someone or fell in love?

The story might not have ended with the telling. Can you write an additional chapter about what happened to your character next?

2. Making History Stories

Goal: Each student will create a story that integrates critical thinking, historical research, and creative writing skills. The project could also result in a story-telling festival, but additional work in telling skills would have to be developed.

A. Students will research the details of the chosen historical era.

- B. Students will create an original character based on themselves. This will include an autobiography of the character.
- C. Students will create an original story based on a real historical episode, determining how it affected the life of their character.

This full curriculum is available to you for the asking. In as much as it is very lengthy and specific, I am not including it in this general guide.

3. Creative Growth and Development

The imagination, without use, becomes a rusty tool.

Story Building

A. Good story-making begins with being a good listener and trusting the unconscious stream of thought.

*With the students in a circle, have them create sentences, adding one word at a time. The game is about attending to the sequence of words as it is created and adding the next logical word until the sequence feels like a complete sentence. Coach students not to think ahead. For instance, one student might begin with:

“Pigs” (the next student adds) “are” (next student) “very” (next student) “fat.” That could be the end of the sentence after just four offerings. Then another sentence would be begun. You want to work toward speedy, effortless additions. This is the beginning of attuned listening and trusting the imagination.

*In the same circle have one student begin with a sentence or phrase and have each student add another sentence or phrase. Again, the objective is not to think ahead, but to listen carefully to what is being said and to trust that what you come up with will continue the story. This exercise can be given additional structure:

*Every time a student uses the word “_____,” clap your hands over your head.

*Every time a student uses a preposition, snap your fingers.

*Every time a student creates a run-on sentence, hit the floor.

(As you see, there are endless variants to this exercise; just try one at a time!)

B. Yes Yes

This exercise helps students get rid of their internal censor and play with the new listening skills they have just acquired.

In teams, one student will be “A” and other “B”

*At the appropriate signal A says “Yes” and B responds affirmatively with a “Yes.” They continue exchanging affirming “Yesses” until, at a predetermined signal, they stop.

*At the appropriate signal, A makes statements, any statements he or she desires. (Do not ask questions. Make positive statements. Don’t be rude to your partner, because we will be reversing the process!) B will greet each statement with the affirmation “yes.”

*End at the appropriate signal. (I like a drum beat or flash of the lights.)

*Reverse the process.

*At the appropriate signal A makes a statement, any statement he or she desires. B responds by saying “Yes” and adds an affirmative comment. For instance:

A: I love chocolate ice cream.

B: Yes, you are in the fat part of the bell curve.

or

A: Responsible government is the wave of the future.

B: Yes, as soon as campaign finance reform is completed.

or

A: The Martians have landed!

B: Yes, that’s why the sky is suddenly green.

Coach students to begin each interaction with a new statement on a different topic.

End at the appropriate signal.

*Reverse the process.

*Each keeps adding affirmative statements until a scenario has been completed.

This is a great way to extend active listening into story making.

I lead complete workshops and classes on the creative process. Feel free to call or write for more information.