

FEATURE ARTICLE

# engaging students in storytelling

**T**HIS ARTICLE IS BASED ON A WORKSHOP PRESENTED BY THE AUTHORS AT THE 2004 INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL LIBRARIANSHIP CONFERENCE, DUBLIN, IRELAND.

Storytelling is an ancient art, as old as oral communication itself. To be human is to be a storyteller; we use stories to define ourselves, to make sense of our world, and to create community. Unfortunately, educators—including teacher-librarians—have often neglected storytelling as a teaching tool and as a useful skill for students. A renewed interest in storytelling, not only by youth but also adults has resulted in storytelling associations, festivals, and clubs. As teacher-librarians, we can help keep storytelling alive in our classrooms and libraries by engaging students in storytelling activities.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF STORYTELLING IN LIBRARIES AND SCHOOLS

The oral tradition of telling stories goes back to the beginning of spoken language. Long before historical events were written down, storytellers relayed stories to preserve culture and heritage (Vansina, 1985). The earliest recorded stories, such as the tales of Gilgamesh, Beowulf, and the Greek and Norse myths, were first communicated as oral tales (Thompson, 1946).

In the 19th century, the rise of nationalism resulted in many of the large collections of stories that we are familiar with today. To preserve the tra-

dition of the folk, folklorists and other collectors would record the stories they heard and preserve them by publishing them. The most well known of these collections was the Grimm brothers' *Kinder und hausmächen* (Household Stories), first published in Germany in 1812. Likewise, Peter Asbjornsen and Jorgen Moe collected stories in Scandinavia; Alexander Afanasiev recorded Russian folktales; and Joseph Jacobs collected stories in England (Thompson, 1946).

The first systematic use of storytelling with children was not in libraries but in kindergartens. When German immigrants moved to North America in the 19th century, they brought the kindergarten movement with them. Storytelling instruction was part of the curriculum for instructors in kindergarten training schools, and in 1905 the first American storytelling text was published—*How to Tell Stories to Children*, by Sara Cone Bryant (Greene, 1996).

When public libraries in North America began to flourish in the mid-1800s, most did not include children's books, much less allow children in the library. Many had restrictions that refused admittance to patrons under a certain age, the particular age varying from library to library (Sterns, 1894). However, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, service to children in public

libraries developed as part of the social reforms initiated during the Progressive Era. These changes included educational reforms as well as the institution of playgrounds, settlement houses, and an increased demand for reading material aimed at children.

In contrast to teachers whose chief interest was to teach children how to read, librarians believed that their job was to create an interest in reading by choice rather than by requirement. To promote reading, librarians employed several means, including storytelling, which they found to be particularly successful (Kimball, 2003).

It is impossible to determine which public library was the first to have a children's story hour, but many story hours made appearances around 1900 in various locations, including the Pratt Institute Free Library in Brooklyn, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and the Buffalo Public Library. Also at this time, public libraries were influenced by Marie Shedlock, an English storyteller. Shedlock had been a teacher for 25 years when she decided to retire and become a professional storyteller. Following 10 successful years of giving storytelling lectures and recitals in Great Britain and France, she came to North America to embark on a recital tour that lasted several years. She gave storytelling recitals, lectured to teachers and librarians, and taught storytelling skills as part of the Carnegie Library Training Class for children's librarians in Pittsburgh (Pellowski, 1990; Thomas, 1982). Shedlock's lecture tour coincided with the beginning of formalized training for librarians in North America. Librarians who studied at the Carnegie Library Training Class were hired in pub-

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lic libraries all across the United States and Canada and had tremendous influence on the use of systematic storytelling programs in libraries. (Kimball, 2003).

Such storytelling programs were used to stimulate children's interest in reading. Early children's librarians were adamant that the benefits of storytelling went far beyond mere entertainment. Librarians found that if the books they used for storytelling programs were included in a display near the storytelling site, children would check them out of the library (Kimball, 2003). This tried-and-true means of bringing book and child together is still used in school and public libraries.

## VALUES OF STORYTELLING

Why do we want to engage our students in storytelling? What are the educational benefits for students? One of the primary reasons, as noted, is to stimulate interest in reading. If you are orally sharing a story that is based on a book, it is important to let your students know that the book is available to be checked out of the school library. Most students love to hear stories, and that love of the story can often be transferred to the printed word.

Storytelling teaches and reinforces both oral and listening skills (Caulfield, 2000; Groce, 2001)—two basic life skills that usually do not receive the same attention in schools as reading and writing. The pleasure that children can receive by listening to stories helps them associate listening with enjoyment. They also learn how to be respectful listeners. Storytelling enhances vocabulary and language development, assisting students in discovering both the beauty and the power of words. Many adults in today's society are afraid of speaking in front of an audience. When children and youth are involved in oral presentations, they become more comfortable with public speaking as they grow older. Thus, storytelling can help foster self-confidence and poise (Caulfield, 2000; Hamilton & Weiss, 1990; Nanos-Bednar, 1998).

A well-told story can nurture the imagination of students and assist them in mental visualization (Baker & Greene, 1977). Too often our youth are bombarded with audio and visual stimulation and are rarely

provided opportunities to mentally see characters, settings, and actions. When students tell stories, they are offered outlets for their own creative expression. The storyteller can change a story, adding ideas or details that make it one's own creation. This is often referred to as "making a story your own."

Storytelling through the ages has been used as a teaching tool, whether for imparting the values contained in many of the folktales or for simply passing along information. Facts embedded in a story are generally much easier to learn and recall than when presented in an informational format (Wagner & Smith, 1969).

Each culture has its own folktales and stories; thus, participation in storytelling can convey an awareness and appreciation of other cultures. It is a way of respecting the heritage of a particular culture, reinforcing societal values, and keeping traditions and folk heroes alive.

Most important, storytelling is fun. Stories can be funny, suspenseful, exciting, and thought provoking. Having times in our school day to laugh and be entertained provides opportunities for students to relax and adds variety to classroom routines.

## STORYTELLING ETIQUETTE

In 1993, storytellers Barbara Griffin, Olga Loya, Sandra MacLees, Nancy Schimmel, Harlyne Geisler, and Kathleen Zundell compiled the following statement (*Storytelling Etiquette*) and placed it in public domain. It is available for reproduction as long as credit is given to the compilers.

- Stories are to share and tell. While we encourage the art of sharing stories, we want to encourage respect in our community.
- You deserve respect. Respect other tellers.
- A storyteller's personal, family, and original stories are her/his copyrighted property. It is unethical and illegal to tell another person's original and family stories without permission of the author/storyteller.
- Folklore and folktales are owned by the public, but a specific version told by an individual teller or found in a collection is the author's or teller's copyrighted property. If you like a folktale a storyteller has told, ask the teller for a reference of where it can

be found. Research the story by finding other versions, and then tell it your way.

- Published literary tales and poetry are copyrighted material. They may be told at informal story swaps, but when you tell another's story in a paid professional setting, you need to request the publisher's/author's permission. You need to research copyright law.

- When telling anywhere, it is common courtesy to credit the source of your story.

Pass stories, tell stories, and encourage respect within the storytelling community.

## TIPS FOR STORYTELLING

### SELECTING A STORY

One of the most important steps in storytelling is the selection of a story that will be shared aloud. Not every book can be used to tell a story. The selected story should have a definite beginning, middle, and end. Folktales, myths, legends, hero tales, humorous stories, and realistic stories are especially suitable for storytelling. Consider the age of the audience when choosing a story. Young children love stories with repetition and pleasing word sounds, whereas older children prefer stories that have action, humor, and suspense. You should always choose a story that you enjoy yourself.

### PREPARING A STORY

Before attempting to tell a story, read it through several times and try to picture the events and hear the voices of the characters. Although you may want to memorize repetitive, interesting, and beautiful phrasing that will help retain the flavor of the original story, avoid memorizing an entire story. Develop a clear outline of the story plot in your mind, then simply tell it. It is particularly important to be familiar with the beginning and the end of a story. Once you feel comfortable that you know the story thoroughly, try to imagine your audience and then practice telling the story aloud numerous times.

### TELLING A STORY

The following are several tips that can help you and your students become successful storytellers:

- Use your natural voice, speaking simply in an unaffected way.
- Speak loudly enough to be easily heard.
- Articulate clearly.
- Use pauses and changes of pace and pitch to create moods.
- Use gestures when appropriate, but avoid movement that is unrelated to the story.
- Keep your face alive and expressive.
- Maintain eye contact with your listeners.
- Subordinate yourself to the story. Remember, you are the instrument; the story is the main feature.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES FOR STORIES

Although your ultimate goal is to have students begin to tell their own stories, you may want to begin getting students involved in storytelling by having them participate in some extension activities of stories that you or another adult storyteller shares. The following are some activities that you can use to involve students in storytelling:

- Discuss possible other endings for a story.
- Tell something that could have happened to one of the characters in a story before or after the story.
- Using a microphone, interview the characters in a story, with one student being a television news reporter and other students being the characters in a story.
- Write a different ending for a story.
- Write a journal entry as one of the characters in a story.
- Write a poem about a story.
- Make up a song or jingle for the story.
- Write a newspaper article about what happened in a story.
- Research one of the characters in a story.
- Draw a picture of a favorite scene in a story.
- Make a comic strip of a story.
- Make a story quilt, with each student drawing a different part of a story and then piecing drawings together.
- Make props that can be used to retell a story.
- Act out a story using sound effects, movements, and gestures.
- Take turns retelling a story by passing along a magic wand or other object and have each student tell a portion of the story.
- Retell a story from another point of view.

- Retell a story, sharing it with a different audience.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Storytelling is still very much a part of the work of youth services librarians in school and public libraries. Whether stories are told with props, costumes, puppets, or flannel boards or whether a storyteller stands alone at the front of the room, stories can stimulate children to read, to listen, and to use their creative skills. Most important, listening to and telling stories helps children connect with and understand themselves and other people, a valuable asset in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

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Vansina, J. (1985). *Oral tradition as history*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

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## SELECTED STORYTELLING RESOURCES

All web sites accessed November 6, 2005.

### ORGANIZATIONS

Jonesborough Storytellers Guild [www.storytellersguild.org](http://www.storytellersguild.org)

National Storytelling Festival [www.storytellingfestival.org](http://www.storytellingfestival.org)

National Storytelling Network <http://storynet.org>

Regional and International Storytelling Guilds [www.storynet.org/guilds/index.htm](http://www.storynet.org/guilds/index.htm)

Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada [www.sc-cc.com](http://www.sc-cc.com)

### HELPFUL ONLINE RESOURCES

International Storytelling Center [www.storytellingcenter.net/index.htm](http://www.storytellingcenter.net/index.htm)

Preschool Education [www.preschooleducation.com](http://www.preschooleducation.com)

Storytelling in the Classroom [www.storyarts.org/classroom](http://www.storyarts.org/classroom)

## PRINT RESOURCES

MacDonald, M. R. (1993). *The story-teller's start-up book: Finding, learning, performing and using folktales*. Little Rock, AR: August House.

Schimmel, N. (1992). *Just enough to make a story: A sourcebook for storytelling*. Berkeley, CA: Sisters' Choice Press.

Sierra, J. (1997). *The flannel board storytelling book*. New York: H. W. Wilson.

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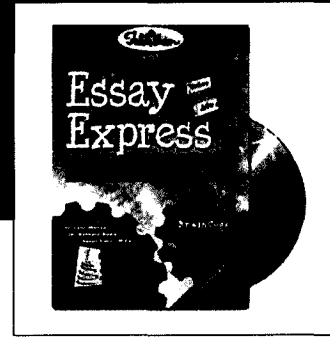
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# BOOKMARKIT



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TROUTNER

## BEST NEW SOFTWARE

**Essay Express.** FableVision. ([www.fablevision.com](http://www.fablevision.com)). Grades 4-8.

This delightful program engages students in learning how to write essay answers to test questions. It begins by establishing a rock band that will write songs to help the students. It then presents options for learning how to determine what might be on a test in the form of an essay, suggestions for gathering clues from the textbook, and other prewriting tips. Strategies for examining the essay question, developing a draft, and structuring the final answer form the second section of the program. Also provided is a review or proofreading scheme. Additional activities and exercises round out the program.

### Suggested uses:

- Project on a large screen and work with the entire class on the various sections.
- Use in a learning center environment as a means of differentiating the learning in your classroom.
- Use as a model for students to develop their own tips on writing essays.
- Have students develop exercises that younger students can use.
- Provide a "think-aloud" look at an essay question and use the Quest review format.
- Have students select which essay-writing tips they could use for other classroom activities.

**Get A Clue.** Fablevision. ([www.fablevision.com](http://www.fablevision.com)). Grades 5-12.

Students learn to incorporate a variety of words into their vocabulary when they use this Internet-based program. Based on the Words and Their Stories premise, students learn about derivation, draw on prior knowledge, practice analogies, and analyze context as they work through the program. Over 1,000 words are included in the program, and teachers have the option of adding their own word lists. Reporting options allow for looking at individual students as well as the entire class. In addition, offline activities can be customized for individual students.

### Suggested uses:

- Use with a projection device as an engagement activity at the start of class.
- Provide differentiated learning options for students.
- Have students develop a set of activities for words related to concepts being studied.
- Use in the school library as a means of helping students study for college entrance exams.