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Storytelling in the School Library Media Center

*When a day passes it is no longer there.
What remains of it? Nothing more than a story.
If stories weren't told or books weren't written,
man would live like the beasts,
only for the day. . . .
Today, we live, but by tomorrow
today will be a story.
The whole world, all human life,
is one long story.*

Isaac Bashevis Singer

Naftali the Storyteller and His Horse, Sus, and Other Stories (10-11)

Last year, one of our second-grade classes studied Japan. I am often called upon to tell Japanese stories, but this time I decided to try telling a story that I had formerly reserved for older students and adults. It is a sad, serious story with an unhappy ending. I was a little apprehensive about the students' responses, but I launched into it optimistically. After about three minutes, I began to notice that the room was absolutely silent. The children's eyes were fixed upon me, and the air between us seemed to be alive, filled with that story, breathing that story. I realized that although the students were staring straight at me, they didn't see me at all. They were far away in Japan, seeing the images of the story unfold before their eyes. It was one of the moments that you live for as a storyteller, a moment when the story works its magic and your listeners are changed, whether for that moment or for a lifetime.

Amidst all of the lessons on the use of the computer catalog, the care of a book, note-taking, research, and the Internet, we as library media specialists are charged with the happy duty of reinforcing in our students

a love of literature. Twenty-five years of experience in a library media center have taught me that there is no better way to introduce children to the beauty of language and the power of story than to put down that book, look our students in the eyes, and tell a story.

Storytelling is more than just entertainment, as we know. It is a powerful educational tool for the classroom or the library media center. Everyone loves a good story, and stories are the perfect vehicles for teaching and learning.

TEACHING VIA STORYTELLING

- *First, and foremost, storytelling is an art form that nurtures the spirit.* Ellin Greene, in *Storytelling: Art & Technique*, says it best: Storytelling brings to the listeners heightened awareness—a sense of wonder, of mystery, of reverence for life. This nurturing of the spirit-self comes first. It is the primary purpose of storytelling and all other uses and effects are secondary (33). When we tell stories that have an inherent truth, we are feeding our students truth about living and about being human. Stories help us to develop compassion, understanding, and a sense of connectedness and the unity of life. Stories help us to see beyond our world into other worlds and into the hearts of other people. Stories help us to connect with a humanity that is bigger than we are as individuals.

- *Storytelling deepens the relationship between teacher and students.* I believe that I have profoundly changed the nature of the relationship between my students and me simply because I tell them stories. I first began to use stories with activities years ago, when I went to a fourth-grade teacher and offered to come to her classroom for 45 minutes once a week for a storytelling experiment. Over the next two months, I told stories and the children retold them, drew pictures, created a picture book, made a slide show, and did other activities to extend the stories beyond the telling. Over the course of those weeks, I began to notice that the children and I reacted to each other in a different way. When I saw them in the hallway or in the library, we smiled at each other as if we shared a secret, for storytelling, potentially one of the most powerful, intimate experiences available, had truly brought us closer together.

Children trust someone who tells something truthful. The educator who tells stories is actually giving a rare gift—the gift of himself or herself. Only you can tell stories the way you do. Only you can pick the stories you do for the reasons that you do. We tell the stories that we love, that our hearts reverberate to, that our psyches respond to. We are truly sharing of ourselves with our students, if we choose our stories carefully and prepare them with integrity. It is also a great risk for us as tellers, for we are putting out in public something that is very meaningful without that book as our crutch to come between us and

our audience. But like many risks, it is an activity that is ultimately self-affirming, and we are richer for having taken the risk.

- ***Storytelling enhances imagination and visualization.*** It is a creative experience for all—for the teller, who must create a mood and a vision of the story, and for the listener, who must create the images and the understandings. The important work is done in the listeners' minds. This is where the story really comes to life. Students have to work for the story to be meaningful, yet it is work that is done effortlessly. The listening is active, not passive. I may select a story for my own personal reasons, but my listeners may take something completely different away—and they may take different things at different times of their lives. I cannot control what their lessons are, nor do I want to.

Storytelling provides food for fantasy, which encourages creativity, originality, and flexibility. It gives us material for daydreaming, for working out our own anxieties, for imagining and wondering. We need this imagination to survive. The information age is here, but we need more than information. We need wisdom. Stories give us the material to develop that wisdom.

- ***Storytelling introduces children to literature and the beauty of language.*** Vocabulary is extended and patterns of language show us the joyful playfulness of words. Using a rhythmic pattern has students immediately joining in—a decided difference from my more inhibited adult audiences! This language is especially meaningful to students because the stories are so meaningful. When I tell a story that comes from a book that our media center owns, there is an immediate rush for that book—and a long list of reserves. Children are eager to see the story in print and to experience it again through reading. Of course, storytelling also introduces students to the joy of literature even when they are unable to read.

- ***Storytelling enhances reading and writing skills.*** Through listening to many stories, children develop a sense of story. They learn that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Stories have a problem and a resolution. There are characters and a setting. This familiarity with story structure helps students to know what to expect when they are reading, to better understand it when they meet it, and to recall it better after the story is over. Children who know story structure are armed with a powerful tool in their own writing efforts and they will innately understand what a story needs.

- ***Storytelling develops listening skills.*** These are skills in active listening, an experience where minds must produce images and the child must provide some effort to get the reward of the experience. Students develop concentration and the ability to follow a sequence. They learn to focus and attend, even in the middle of a busy media center.

One of my favorite times of the year is the annual telling of “Mr. Fox” to our fifth-grade classes. In the story, Mary, the main character, has

stumbled upon the home of Mr. Fox, her wealthy but mysterious suitor. Mr. Fox is not at home, but Mary, curious and bold, decides to explore the house when the front door opens at her knock. Upstairs, she opens Mr. Fox's bedroom closet door to discover, to her horror, one huge vat of human hair, one of human bones, and a third of blood. She runs down the stairs only to see, through the window, Mr. Fox coming toward the house dragging a young woman. Quickly, Mary hides in the space under the stairway just seconds before Mr. Fox enters the house and starts up the stairway. When the young woman grasps the stair railing, he pulls out his sword and cuts off her hand at the wrist—a hand that falls into Mary's lap—and the room is silent and every single fifth-grader is listening!

- *Storytelling introduces students to the world and other cultures.* Every country has a rich heritage of story. All over the world we find the same themes of love, loss, betrayal, and journeying on the quest. We meet tricksters in every culture, as well as silly folk, wise elders, brave heroes and heroines, and evil villains. We find that we are not alone in this world. We see where we fit in to the wonderful diversity of human life. Folklore is every child's heritage—the history of humankind in stories. It is a way to celebrate our human similarities and our cultural differences at the same time.

A STORY FOR EVERY OPPORTUNITY

I never pass up an opportunity to use storytelling at school. Whether it is ghost stories at Halloween, a frog story during a unit on amphibians, coaching fifth-graders learning legends during a Native American unit, using stories with creative drama and creative writing, or during our six-week second-grade unit on folk and fairy tales, there is always time for a story. Children would rather listen to a story than do almost anything else in the media center, and frankly, I would rather be telling a story than almost anything else! But I am careful to provide times for storytelling without activities—children need times just for the sheer pleasure of hearing a good story.

In kindergarten, I start off by telling very simple stories, ideally with lots of characters but extremely simple plots. "The Great Big Enormous Turnip" is the first. I tell the story, then invite the children to act it out. We repeat the story as many times as needed to give everyone a chance (hence the large number of characters required). Of course, another option is to choose stories with fewer characters and let students know that they will have a chance to act in the future, if not today. As I am asking, "Who wants to be Grandpa? Who wants to be the dog?," the students' hands are waving wildly and they are eager to jump up and take a part. I tell the story again, but stop whenever it is time for a character to speak—and the children jump in with their lines. Having a repetitious story ensures that the children will remember their parts with ease.

In every grade level, primary through intermediate, drawing a picture of the most memorable part or the favorite part is a valuable activity. I love to see the pictures that my students have created in their minds and to know what made the most impression on them. Sometimes I give them paper that has been folded into three parts so that they can draw pictures from the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story.

Rewriting stories requires students to listen closely, recall events in a sequence, and use the vocabulary of the story. It also requires stories that are very, very short, with no repetition at all. Rewriting stories can be very tiresome if something has to be repeated over and over. Our first session is a joint one, where I tell a story and then invite the children to retell it as a class while I type it into a computer that is displayed on a screen so that they can follow along. If two classes retell the same story, I give copies of each to each teacher and invite them to post both in the room, so that students can see how the retellings produced different versions. In later stories, students will rewrite a story individually immediately after the telling. I will also invite the children to change details in the story as they put it into their own words. We discuss what elements can be changed (e.g., gender of characters) and what cannot (e.g., the ending). We decide the point of the story. What is the theme of the story? What is this story really about? The room is dead quiet as the children are writing.

Our six-week folk and fairy tale unit in second grade is made possible by the flexible schedule that allows each class to come to the media center every day for six weeks. During week one, we focus on fairy tales, with a telling every day followed by students filling out a story map. The six sections in the story map are protagonist, setting, initial action, antagonist, problem, and resolution. A lesson on 398.2 (the Dewey designation for folk and fairy tales) helps each student to find a book to carry to the classroom for the class collection. Week two focuses on Cinderella variants, starting with the classic Grimms' version. Children think they know the story, but they are surprised by this version that is so different from the Disney one, with its helpful birds, cut up feet, and wicked stepsisters being soundly punished. Story maps are still being filled out to reinforce children's familiarity with the basic story structure. Week three focuses on folktales from different continents, with notable picture books read aloud every day. During the fourth week, the telling of folktales from different countries each day is followed by an activity: drawing a picture and writing sentences describing the scene; retelling the story as a class as I type it into the computer; working with a partner to put strips of the story into correct sequence; drawing pictures of the beginning, middle, and end of the story; and drawing a map of the story, one in which the action occurs in many places.

One whole-class activity is the creation of a picture book. A long story is chosen because it must be divided into at least as many scenes as there

are students in the class. After the telling, I invite the children to recall the story. Key words from each scene are written on a sheet of paper, one scene per page. Then the scenes are assigned to the children, each taking one or two, depending on the number of children. They take the papers to the classroom where they will each write the narration for the scenes. A day or two later, we gather together again and the scenes are read aloud in order. We check to make sure that nothing is left out and nothing repeated. I encourage them to be descriptive and to include dialogue. After a final edit, I type the pages. The children illustrate them and the entire book is duplicated so that each child has his or her own copy.

The final activity is the "Battle of the Folktales." The students write practice questions (In what story did a girl receive help from a fish? How do you get to Mother Holle's house?) and the teachers hold class battles. The final battle is in the media center with representatives from each class on each team, to minimize the competitive factor. It is an exciting finish to a unit that results in every child truly loving stories.

During our third-grade "Jack Tale" unit, we add on the activity of retelling in a circle. After the telling, I seat the children in a big circle and start off the story again. After a few sentences I stop and turn to the next child, who continues the telling until I say stop. We continue around the circle until the story is retold. This is a great way to invite children to tell without the pressure of having to remember an entire story.

During this unit we create a video of a story. It follows the same procedure as the making of a picture book, with each child responsible for one or two scenes. This time the children each draw pictures of their scenes on a piece of 12-inch by 18-inch paper. They write the narration to their scenes and I videotape the drawings while they read their writing off-camera. This has become one of the most popular of all storytelling activities and students are encouraged to borrow the video to show their families at home.

Our mythology/astronomy unit in fourth grade provides another opportunity to bring storytelling into the curriculum. I put up a transparency of a constellation and tell the Greek myth behind the constellation. The students will then each choose a constellation, make a transparency of it, and tell the corresponding myth to the class while showing the transparency. I've seen some amazing examples of student storytelling during this unit.

More student storytelling is encouraged during the fifth-grade unit on Native Americans. Each student is required to find, learn, and tell a Native American legend and also create a picture book of the story. I meet with the students in small groups to coach them. Two meetings per group, a week apart, are necessary at a minimum. Later they will tell their

stories to younger children as they give their presentations on Native American culture.

These are only some of the many ideas that could be used to bring storytelling into the curriculum, either in the classroom or media center. Whatever ideas you choose, the rewards are great. If you've been reading stories aloud, you are already halfway there. My training in timing and expression came from the hundreds of picture books I read aloud over the years. It took only one time of putting the book down, looking into my students' eyes, and seeing their rapt attention to turn me into a believer in the power of storytelling. Above all, enjoy yourself. Have fun! Wrap your story with love and give it as a gift. Your students will love you for it.

Editor's Note: A listing of references and resources, including a folktale unit-plan for teaching second-graders, is included in the appendix of this volume.

WORKS CITED

- Greene, Ellin. *Storytelling: Art & Technique*. 3rd ed. New Providence: R. R. Bowker, 1996.
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