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Why we need storytelling in our curriculum

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Why we Need Storytelling in our Curriculum

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Storytelling is an art as old as time and yet as relevant today as any cutting edge science. In the words of organizational communication expert, Stephen Denning,

...storytelling is pervasive in our lives. It has been at the heart of our communications since the beginning of the human race. Through stories, our values and principles have been passed from one generation to another. Stories provide continuity in our lives, conveying a sense of where we have come from, our history, and our heritage. Stories are immediate and unique. They celebrate how previous generations dealt with dilemmas in their lives. Storytelling brings people together in a common perspective, and stretches everyone's capacity to empathize with others and share experience. (Denning, 2001, xviii)

And according to management communication researchers Weick and Brown (1986), storytelling is one way of strengthening our cultures. Indeed, literary essayists like Sven Birkerts (1994) fear that technology and digital media may be interfering with our ability to be creative, subjective and ultimately, adaptable. When we follow a story we follow the storyteller into another world-when we watch films we are mere observers on the outside looking in.

In recent years storytelling has been making a comeback in American schools as evidenced by the following excerpt from the 1992

position statement on storytelling from the U.S. National Council of Teachers of English:

Once upon a time, oral storytelling ruled. It was the medium through which people learned their history, settled their arguments, and came to make sense of the phenomena of their world. Then along came the written word [...]. Oral storytelling, like the simpleminded youngest brother in the olden tales, was foolishly cast aside. [...] Luckily, a few wise librarians, camp counselors, folklorists, and traditional tellers from cultures, which still highly valued the oral tale kept storytelling alive. [...] Teachers discovered that children could easily recall whatever historical or scientific facts they learned through story. (Story telling in Schools, 2008)

Storytelling is also enjoying resurgence in the UK and EU in schools and in the general community. According to the StoryQuest 2006 website, reasons for encouraging storytelling include:

Setting the imagination on fire: Oral stories stimulate immediate and vivid imaginative responses in the listener as each child conjures their own images in the cinema screen of the mind's eye.

Story-tellers and story-listeners: Children of all ages are enthralled by storytelling and the chance to become storytellers. Hearing and telling stories gives children access to narrative without the boundaries of paper, pens and print. Retelling stories draws on language and speaking skills, requiring children to sequence events, select language, empathise with and develop characters and evoke settings for whoever their audience may be.

Crossing boundaries: Stories cross boundaries of time, geography, and culture. They are filled with opportunities to stand in the shoes of character after character understanding their motives and emotions, their actions and the consequences of those actions. They engage both tellers and listeners with debate over decisions, and predictions of outcomes. Collecting stories from friends and relatives binds and finds commonality between people within and across generations and cultures.

Dealing with ideas: Children are story experts. Because narrative is the most familiar way of organising experiences, they implicitly know a lot about stories, how they're constructed, what to expect and how to respond. At the same time this familiarity reinforces story language and structure whilst dealing with big issues and big ideas. (Story Quest, 2006)

According to Geisler (2008) "Children today are losing the ability to imagine, to create their own images" so storytelling provides the opportunity to reignite that skill. Furthermore, storytelling has importance for emotional and psychological development because "without fantasy to give us hope, we cannot meet the adversities of life" (Bettelheim, 1989). Stephen Denning and other knowledge management experts like him have come to realize that the precise definitions that we find in much academic prose are often "unintelligible except to someone who already understands the topic" and also "needs a considerable mental effort just to comprehend it" (pp. 64-65). On the other hand, Denning acknowledges that an "explicit story is simple and accessible" because if the listener understands the context of the story they are "able to extrapolate from the anecdote this experience across other organizations and other contexts" (p. 65).

More than two decades of quantitative research indicates that story telling is highly effective and important for learning, teacher training and research. According to a position paper by The Youth, Educators, and Storytellers Alliance (2006), "In all academic areas, storytelling enlivens the delivery of curriculum, accelerates and enhances curriculum learning, and engages learners. It encourages students to think about issues, and it can also deliver emotional and factual content beyond a child's vocabulary or reading ability. Storytelling helps students stretch and expand their thinking." Maslan (2006) backs this assertion up by citing US Department of Education research about the innovative program called Stagebridge. "Students who worked with Stagebridge storytellers gained a greater awareness and understanding of storytelling as an art form," said

Stuart Kandell, Ph.D., founder and director of Stagebridge. “They also showed ‘significant’ improvement in language arts and listening comprehension skills as a result of the program” (Maslan, 2006, n.p.).

Learning

Numerous studies cite the linguistic benefits of storytelling and story reading. A study on story telling and story reading with children ages 3-5 (Isbell et al, 2004) found that although both storytelling and story reading were found to produce positive gains in oral language, young children who heard the stories told demonstrated improved story comprehension in their retelling, whereas children in the story reading group improved their language complexity. In an earlier study, Trostle and Hicks (1998) found that children who witnessed storytelling scored higher on comprehension/vocabulary measures than did children who listened to story reading. In the area of second language acquisition Asher (2000) reports that students who were trained in Total Physical Response Storytelling scored significantly higher in the comprehension of an unfamiliar story compared with students who had been trained using the Audio Lingual Method.

Storytelling also benefits learning in other subject areas. O'Neill et al (2004) found that pre-school children's early storytelling abilities are predictive of their mathematical ability two years later. In 2005, a project at the University of Tennessee found that attitudes of primary school students toward science quantitatively improved after listening to folk tales about constellations, followed by the science explanations.

Social and emotional development is also influenced positively by storytelling. Yeoman, (1999) conducted case studies to examine how students use their intertextual knowledge to understand and produce disruptive stories regarding gender thereby enhancing their ability to read and write critically. This is supported by Myers and Hilliard (2001), who claim that storytelling by students helps to develop higher-level thinking skills, such as analysis and synthesis, as well as

skills in oral composition. Hohn (2000) found that storytelling by children and adolescents contributes to social and emotional competence. A 2008 Scientific American article (Hsu, 2008) cites research by Oatley claiming that students who had had more exposure to fiction tended to perform more skillfully on social ability and empathy tests.

Teacher Training

Story telling is an interdisciplinary field that has recently been included in university curricula around the world (visit website cited in Miller, 2008 for the latest updated list). Such curriculum innovations are in response to the previously described research into learning and also in concert with research into teacher training. Coulter et al (2007) examined incidents in which narrative inquiry served as a valuable pedagogical tool. Mello (2001) compares data and findings from four ethnographic, qualitative, arts-based studies that examined either students' or teachers' reactions to oral narration in classroom settings. Her research suggests that the activity of storytelling has an impact on participants' interpersonal relationships, empathy, and sense of "connectedness" in the classroom. Therefore, telling stories aloud (without the aid of books, multimedia presentations, or other devices) needs to have primacy in classrooms.

Research

Davis (2007) examined how storytelling can be used as a method of collecting authentic and revealing research data from children. She found that the children's storytelling gave access to their cultural models of reading and can provide a useful and credible method of collecting research data from children. Storytelling may be especially useful with poor readers as there are no literacy demands, and in this respect, affords socially inclusive research. Much research is yet to be done in this area.

Bringing Storytelling into Japanese Curriculum

Looking at Model Programs

Japan has strong storytelling traditions yet storytelling has not yet been systematically introduced into teacher training curriculum. By looking at model programs it may be possible to determine the best way to do so. One excellent model is the “Vertel” Festival at Alden Biesen Castle in Belgium, which is the world’s largest story telling festival (for a more detailed description of the Alden Biesen event see Zenuk-Nishide, 2008). It has been in existence for 13 years and is the brainchild of Guy Tilkin, a former high school teacher who now manages all of the cultural events at Alden Biesen Castle.

Guy Tilkin wanted to provide a place for second language learning and literature to be brought alive through exposure to authentic language via high quality storytelling. The festival hires professional story tellers from around the world and has become an extremely popular event. In 2008 more than 19,000 tickets were sold for events during the 9 days of the festival (April 14-22).

The festival is typically attended by:

Elementary school children ([L1] Dutch, [L2] English)

Junior High ([L2] English, French)

Senior High ([L2] English, French, Spanish, German, Italian)

Adult Night School-Belgian NS of Dutch ([L2] English, French, Spanish, German, Italian)

Adult Night School-Immigrants ([L2] Dutch)

Teacher Trainees-undergraduate teacher certification programs ([L2] English)

Teachers ([L2] English, French, Spanish, Italian)

General public ([L1] Dutch, [L2] English, French, Spanish, Italian)

During the festival in 2008, British storyteller, Daniel Morden, led an Erasmus Teacher Trainee Workshop on storytelling for undergraduate teacher trainees in the Erasmus/EU/teacher-training

program at the Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg University College in Hasselt, Belgium (for teachers in Early childhood and primary school). The Erasmus EOS (Experiential Orientated Spring Module) course is offered to 27 students for three months for which they receive a total of 20 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) the students represented 6 nationalities and all teacher trainees are expected to go abroad for study for at least 2 weeks. The workshop in storytelling (worth 2 ECTS as part of the course called “International Literature”) is an important part of this training course as it offers a valuable pedagogical tool and leads to the building of confidence among the trainees.

Professor Anita Boesmans, the Erasmus coordinator for the EOS program at department of teacher training in the Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg University College expressed interest in starting reciprocal exchanges of teacher trainees between Europe and Japan. Among educators in Europe, there is a strong interest in a style of storytelling that originated in Japan, *kamishibai*, in which illustrated stories are mounted on strong cardboard with the text printed on the back of the illustrations. This would be one small avenue of cultural exchange.

There was also a Story-telling Workshop for adult community members offered by British storyteller, Nick Hennessey. He worked with adults (15) who belong to story telling clubs or were generally interested in developing their story telling abilities. First he told a story and had the group summarize it in 7 sentences, then cluster it into three stages and finally decide what the overall theme was (he called this activity 7-3-1). He had the group work in pairs to spontaneously make up a story based on a random object that he gave them and then retell the story, trade objects and retell the story they had heard. Finally the story was retold to the original person- they could appreciate how the story had evolved and improved with each retelling.

Implementation in current pedagogy

The Story Quest 2006 website <http://www.storyquest.org.uk/2006/schools/> has numerous ideas for integrating storytelling into school curriculum. Of particular interest is that they state the links to learning/curriculum connection for each of the suggested activities (see Table 1 for a limited sample). An annotated list of story telling web sites with pedagogical ideas is included in the Appendix.

Although storytelling on mobile phones or the production of novels on cellular phones (keitai shousetsu) has recently hit the news

Table 1. Some storytelling links to learning/curriculum connection (adapted from StoryQuest 2006 website)

Activity	Description	Links to Learning
Playground Lore	Children have their own private oral cultures, you'll find sayings and non-sense rhymes chanted, sung and muttered in playgrounds as part of clapping and skipping games, taunts and retorts, and when choosing who is going to be 'it' for a game of tag.	Citizenship, Speaking & Listening, Literacy, PE
Almost true tales	Collect and create narratives from real life stories and reminiscences from home.	Citizenship, Speaking & Listening, Literacy
Mapping stories	Research local legends, ghost stories and the stories that lie behind place names that are connected with your local area	Citizenship, Speaking & Listening, Literacy, Geography, History
Group tells	Children devise ways to tell stories in groups.	Speaking & Listening, Drama, Music, PE, PHSE & Citizenship
What's in a name?	Create stories based on local place names.	History, Geography, Speaking & Listening, Literacy
Courtroom drama	Put a character from a story on trial.	PHSE & Citizenship, Speaking & Listening, Literacy, Drama

in Japan, critics claim that “Scene and character development are notably missing” (Norrie, 2007) and they are severely limited by their small vocabulary range. This is just another of the limitations of the digital age that are limiting the minds and imaginations of young people. There is definitely a place for oral storytelling in education, teacher training, business, knowledge management and the community in general.

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Appendix: Storytelling Lesson Plans, Activities and Resources

<http://www.storyarts.org/lessonplans/index.html>

This collection of story-related activities, projects and games-developed by storyteller/author Heather Forest for her storytelling workshops with students, teachers, and librarians-can be used by educators in a school setting to encourage speaking, listening, reading and writing skills.

Norfolk, S. & Stenson J. (2006). The Storytelling Classroom: Applications Across the Curriculum. Libraries Unlimited.

A collection of pre-K through eighth grade lesson plans by and for teachers and media specialists who use storytelling in the classroom and storytellers who work in the classroom. Each lesson plan is linked to National Standards in Language Arts Social Studies, Math or Science.

Tim Sheppard's storytelling links for storytellers

<http://www.timsheppard.co.uk/story/tellinglinks.html>

Probably the biggest collection of storytelling resources on the web, annotated and categorised for easy reference.

Circle of Stories for Educators

<http://www.pbs.org/circleofstories/educators/>

These lessons are directed toward grades 6 through 12, for use in the following subject areas: language arts, theater, history, social studies, multicultural studies, technology, and life science.

The educator's reference desk: Storytelling reference plans

http://www.eduref.org/cgi-bin/lessons.cgi/Language_Arts/Story_Telling

This is a site where teachers are encouraged to contribute lesson plans. There are a series of lessons on well known children's stories.