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Harnessing the Power of Story:  
Using Narrative Reading and Writing Across Content Areas

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This article reviews research to examine how teaching and learning are improved with the use of narrative story materials. Stories help to focus the reader’s attention and build personal connection, resulting in better retention and deeper subject-matter understanding. Four key advantages of narratives cited by D. T. Willingham are discussed. The effectiveness of stories is further supported by a review of research from diverse fields, including cognitive psychology, social and physical sciences, education, and communication. Suggestions and strategies for the use of narrative materials in content area settings beyond the elementary classroom are also provided.
It was a memorable professional conference. The keynote speaker, formerly the head of our international professional organization, had a distinct research perspective and specific advice for change. In his address, he spun a moving fable of the forces of change doing battle against the forces of bureaucratic inertia and negativism. His final vignette, about a family member who inspired him to become a teacher, moved the audience to tears. I considered for a moment how the same message, the same important, well-supported and documented research stance, and the same topics, in the hands of less competent speakers, would have been vastly less effective. What had he done to move the audience to thunderous applause during a scholarly presentation? What was the rhetorical magic that helped this scholar connect with his audience? Story. The speaker’s message that reflective writing improved reading comprehension was cogently peppered with facts, ideas and research. Yet, it was a story that moved the audience. He told a story about finding the journal of his disabled sister who, despite a physical handicap, persevered to become a teacher. The speaker was simply applying what troubadours, balladeers, storytellers, authors and of course, savvy literacy educators have known for years: Story, or narrative, is a powerful—perhaps the most powerful—tool for teaching and learning because of its ability to hook audiences, activate the pleasure principle, and facilitate retention.

Narrative, a form of discourse which tells a story, is derived from the Latin gnarare, meaning ‘to know.’ Indeed, narratives are an old tradition built upon a human need to “make meaning and to forge connections between seeming disparate bits of knowledge and experience” in human culture (Blyer & Perkins, 1999, p. 245). Stories involve the reader and the listener by drawing them in and making them a part of their world or vision of reality (Kelly & Zak, 1999). From time immemorial, stories help to maintain the survival of cultures, by retelling exploits of a culture’s or community’s heroes against the threats of its enemies. These stories reinforce and create shared meaning, shared values, collective memory, and group vision. (Kelly & Zak, 1999). These collective themes are seen in trade books, literary anthologies, picture and chapter books, the familiar sources of narrative literature in language arts programs and English classes in schools.
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Narrative material emphasizes a story and a personal identification with a character while expository prose uses facts, logic and rhetorical structures to persuade or inform. Expository writing or exposition is a word derived from the Latin, *exponere*, meaning to put forth, explain and demonstrate. This term refers to texts which typically explain or argue a point through logical structures. Reading or listening to expository discourse places a heavy demand on the reader’s ability to apply prior knowledge and follow the author’s logical and rhetorical structures (Richgels, Tomlinson & Tunnell, 1993; Gambrell, Morrow & Pennington, 2000; Galda & Liang, 2003; Mills & Stephens, 2004). Textbooks are the most common and typical form of expository writing used in schools, although for adults, important sources of expository prose include professional journals and trade periodicals. Content area literacy instruction and knowledge typically involve numerous strategies for helping readers grasp the author’s logical structure by uncovering patterns of expository text, monitoring comprehension, paraphrasing, summarizing and responding through discourse. Competence in reading and writing expository prose is an important hallmark of high stakes testing and literacy standards.

This article does not intend to suggest that students should not become literate in the reading and writing of expository materials, nor should they fail to develop intertextual and intergenre competence. Such a course of action would fly in the face of research and well-established classroom practice. However, the purpose of this article is to take a fresh look at research from cognitive psychology and other disciplines which suggests that narrative materials hold special cognitive and affective advantages. My story is how diverse fields use narrative and the goal is to help content-area teachers re-think the role of narrative and storytelling in their content-area classrooms.

The “privileged status” of story – evidence from cognitive psychology

Cognitive psychologist, Willingham (2004), believes that as a teaching and learning tool, story has “privileged status,” meaning that the human mind treats narrative differently from other types of discourse (procedural, descriptive and factual). Willingham (2004) outlined four main advantages of narrative texts: (a) everyone loves a good story, i.e.,
stories are universally enjoyed as oral or written discourse; (b) stories are easier to comprehend thus read more quickly than non-narratives; (c) the structure of narratives—known as story grammar—provides a more familiar organizational pattern for ideas which is more accessible than expository texts; and (d) active reading involves "on-line" processing and makes inferences and narrative texts evoke interesting ambiguities or unresolved details which translate to more effective memory-making. Before examining the use of narrative in a variety of fields and educational applications, I shall build a case for using narrative by elaborating on Willingham’s four key points.

*Everyone loves a good story*

The universal appeal of stories is a fact indisputable to literacy professionals, librarians, parents, spiritual leaders, politicians, and educators. Across cultures and time, storytelling has had central importance to human language development. Literacy professionals certainly support Willingham’s (2004) assertion. For example, Heilman, Blair and Rupley (2002) allocate storytelling to a central role in children’s language development and reading readiness programs. Galda, Ash and Cullinan, (2000) researched children’s book preferences, and found that generally speaking, [narrative] fiction is preferred by children over non-fiction, expository materials. In Martinez and McGee’s (2000) historical review of materials used for instruction, they suggest that story-type material is used more extensively than non-fiction in the primary grades for reading instruction. Martinez and McGee’s (2000), review of research on the use of children’s literature in classrooms corroborated the dominance of literature in elementary language arts classes, since the advent of the whole language movement in the 1990’s. Baumann, Hoffman, Moon and Duffy-Hester’s (1998) survey of U.S. teachers found that an overwhelming majority (94%) believed that an important goal was to develop readers who were independent and motivated to choose, appreciate and enjoy literature. Gambrell, Morrow and Pennington (2000) endorsed a literature-based program across the content areas, noting that stories amplify children’s opportunities to learn about the world and how they will navigate the world. These same researchers recommended using stories to help children experience, share and create stories to consolidate their understanding of the world. Caine,
Caine, McClintek, and Klimek (2005) recommend the use of story as a way to make students ready to learn, and activate what they consider an optimal learning state, “relaxed alertness.” They stated that good teachers find ways to bring stories into everything they teach and scour their curriculum for relevant stories to help students make connections. Sousa (2001) recommended using storytelling to help the student see how events find personal relevance as well as the importance of learning. Further, Sousa asserts when a teacher tells a story or shares an anecdote, students are more apt to experience the two necessary conditions for placing information in their long-term memory: sense (cohesiveness) and meaning (significance). Caine et al. (2005) refer to sense and meaning as a sense of “wholeness,” (i.e., the learners’ feeling of connection of events in the world).

Stories are easier to comprehend

Willingham (2004) characterized stories as easier to comprehend because they provide signals or cues of sequence, use repetition of familiar names and phrases and vocabulary words, and generate interests in a main character or characters. Such redundancies facilitate the reader’s organization of information and active processing. Willingham cited a study by Graesser, Singer, and Trabasso (1994), who found that narrative structure significantly speeds up reading time, compensating for elements such as grammatical complexity, vocabulary load, and topic familiarity. Comparing narrative and expository materials, Williams (1993) and Saenz and Fuchs (2002), suggest that such signals indeed ease the comprehension task for struggling readers. Also, experiments by Kim and VanDusen (1998) and Zhang and Hoosain, (2001) demonstrated that features of story language and structure may provide more recall help than prior knowledge alone. Geiger and Millis (2004) investigated textual formats for procedural manuals and found that procedural manuals re-written in narrative style helped subjects perform a series of assembly tasks more quickly and accurately.

Narrative story structure facilitates making connections

Cronon (1992) pointed out that “narratives...are intrinsically teleological forms, in which an event is explained by the prior events or
causes that lead up to it” (p. 1,370). Thus, a story is a chain of events causing complications for the main character (protagonist). Willingham (2004) builds his case for the universality of story by finding a common thread between the oral narratives of young children and screenplays by sophisticated screenwriters. Willingham calls these the four C’s: causality, conflict, complications and character. The four C’s move a story forward when a character who possesses certain behavioral traits and dispositions makes a choice or decision that initiates a chain of events. Another term used to refer to this common pattern is story grammar. Thus, the beginning, middle and end of a story are delineated by several distinctive signposts such as character development, conflict, problem and resolution. The effects of explicit teaching of story grammar have been investigated at the pre-school level (Bui, 2002); elementary school students (Slater, 1992) and selected populations of learning disabled children (Williams, 1993; Gardill & Jitendra, 1999; Saenz & Fuchs, 2002). A common finding is that story grammar is a structure that is both child-friendly and effective for helping children organize a text and make meaning. Also, Gersten, Fuchs and Williams (2001) found: “When students know story grammar, the basic structure for narrative texts, they recall more of the information representing major story grammar categories, and also recognize which story events are closely related to the basic causal chain in a story” (p. 282).

Stories facilitate on-line processing and inference-making

In discussing how stories facilitate active processing on the part of the reader, Willingham (2004) refers to the Causal Bridging Hypothesis. Expository texts contain logical propositions, concepts and arguments which are explicitly laid out by the author and may pose conceptual or logical difficulties for some readers. However, while reading narrative “the listener (or reader) makes inferences that are neither terribly easy, nor impossibly difficult...but just right” (p. 44). Willingham likened story to a puzzle which is sufficiently challenging to keep the puzzle-doer occupied, yet at a level of difficulty which does not discourage its solution. Willingham asserted that “most researchers believe that it is the causal connections that make stories easier to remember” (p. 45), citing experiments by Gentner (1976) and Bartlett (1932) in which subjects remember causal details long after other story details such as time and
place are forgotten. Suh and Trabasso (1993) compared the retelling responses of subjects who read stories that contained explicit explanations of a character's behavior, with responses of subjects reading stories in which the explicit goal of the character was not given. In recall tests, there was no significant difference in subjects' abilities to infer character motives. Narrative structure, with its emphasis on inference making, may be a case of 'less is more,' evoking the reader's imagination to fill in gaps.

The causal bridging hypothesis is based on seminal story comprehension research by Kintsch (1994), who developed the situational model of text comprehension. Kintsch's experiments led him to conclude that in order to comprehend a text, the reader must grasp the surface structure (the logical details and coherent structure of the story) he calls "textbase," and apply "information provided by the text elaborated from prior knowledge and integrated with it" (p. 294). Graesser et al. (1994) who experimented with narrative texts and extended and clarified Kintsch's model, found that during story reading, the reader makes (a) a meaning assumption about the purposes of the story; (b) a coherence assumption, (i.e., a structure derived from the coherent processing of surface details such as time, place, and causality); and (c) an explanation assumption, or the attempt to explain why actions, events and states are mentioned in the story text. Although no specific comparisons between expository and narrative materials were made, Graesser et al. (1994) did suggest that compared to stories, expository text "is decontextualized with new concepts, generic truths and technical material...that the typical reader does not have extensive background knowledge about" (p. 372). Several investigations conducted by Zwaan, Magliano and Graesser (1995) and Graesser, Wiemer-Hastings and Wiemer-Hastings (2001) support the so-called "causal bridging hypothesis," (i.e., that the mind actively processes a text making active and continuous ('on-line') causal connections generation while reading). Lea (1995) summarized experimental results suggesting that "people are very accurate at making these [story] inferences" and that "readers make them easily" without realizing they are making inferential leaps (p. 1,472). Other researchers have experimented with re-written texts (Britton & Gulgoz, 1991; Zwaan, Langston & Graesser, 1995; Vidal-Abraca, Martinez & Gilabert, 2000) to test the causal bridging
hypothesis. Results indicated that causality is always a link to recall, especially in narrative texts or expository texts re-written to more closely resemble narrative story.

The causal bridging hypothesis helps to explain how during the process of reading or listening to stories, the reader/listener activates prior knowledge and engages in active processing. Frick (1992) believed that merely having one's prior experience activated does not pique interest. Instead, it is the anomalous information, novelty, curiosity and suspense generated in the narrative, along with a resolution of a perceived ambiguity or conflict, that makes a story compelling. Frick (1992) referred to this characteristic of story as postdictability, suggesting that we remember a story because new or unusual information was resolved at the end. Frick (1992) believes that postdictability is at the heart of interestingness. Iran-Nejad (1987) experiments tested Frick's theory. In a series of text processing experiments and post-reading interviews of his subjects, Iran-Nejad found that stories create incongruities and cognitive dissonances that stimulate interest, and that activation of prior knowledge per se did not generate interest. Similarly, Graesser and McMahen (1993) found that "persons will ask more questions when there are anomalous transformations of original problems or stories than when there are no such transformation" (p. 147). Kim (1999) investigated Frick's thesis that interestingness is based on the tension between perceived anomalies and the resolution of conflicts in the story. Kim (1999) conducted a series of experiments to examine whether the interestingness of a story would be influenced by the inference-making process. Kim (1999) found that when reading a story re-written with an anomalous or unexpected ending, subjects relied on the story structure and prior knowledge to fill in the gaps and comprehend the outcome. Kim (1999) concluded, "When a story contains such detailed information that there is no gap to fill in, the reader does not need to generate inferences. In this case, the story would not be interesting" (p. 67). Willingham (2004) believes that this postdictability is at the heart of why people remember stories better than other forms of discourse.

In summary, experimental data and analyses of textual features make a convincing case for the power of story. Since educational
materials are both narrative and expository, many investigators have analyzed the language and structure of trade books (i.e., literature) and textbooks in an attempt to fuel the debate about the best way to promote factual understanding in subject areas. These findings are discussed in the following section of the article.

Comparing narrative materials and trade books to traditional textbooks

The use of story and storytelling to sustain early reading growth and to promote a love of reading and literature appears well-grounded in research in child development and classrooms. Why does the use of story end by middle grades and secondary school? Why do so many content area teachers abandon story or relegate it to the English class? Richgels et al. (1993) are among the researchers who compared history textbooks and trade books for the teaching of history for the purposes of determining “how do high-quality trade books compare in terms of comprehensibility with the textbooks that they might replace?” (p. 161). After analyzing the readability and organizational structures of both types of materials, these investigators concluded:

- trade books are better structured and more coherent (i.e., considerate) than textbooks;
- trade books may contain longer sentences and more vocabulary words than textbooks, yet they are readable because of the greater extent of signal words, proper nouns and other referents which signal the reader (narrative structure);
- trade books permit exploration of an idea or concept in depth while textbooks favor content coverage and breadth; and
- readability of textbooks and their ability to be comprehended by students are not the same.

Textbooks may satisfy readability formulas but lack the ability to help students understand causal relationships because the amount of explicit detail is simply too great to permit hypothesis generation and meaning-making.
Other investigators echoed the concerns of Richgels et al. (1993) about problems with textbooks. In a twenty year summary of research on the use of children's literature in middle school social studies classrooms, Edgington (1998) found:

- trade books bring a human element to the lesson;
- children can put themselves in the place of characters and develop feelings and understanding of the characters and the era;
- students can look at the story and see similarities and differences with their own lives; and
- authors use narratives to reconstruct authentic details of setting, language and customs.

However, Edgington (1998) found equivocal value in the use of literature for the teaching of content knowledge, and found that the use of literary materials "had neither a positive nor negative effect on students' opinions of social studies," concluding, however that "perhaps in some way the 'story' can be put back into history and social studies" (p. 129). Olwell (1999), however, noted that the use of narratives in a middle school social studies course did "bridge the gap between the concrete and abstract" (p. 1) by encouraging the students to think and to project themselves into the experience of slaves. Paxton (1999), a professor of history, criticized textbooks that opt for a factual, linear or expository approach coming down clearly on the side of those historians who understand that reading a social studies text is an interpretative, analytic, and dialogic process, or those who forget that humans are a story-telling species. Saenz and Fuchs (2002) compared expository texts and narrative texts and found that the latter were easier to read, particularly among populations of learning disabled children. Eng (2002) found that among college-age volunteers, texts rewritten as narratives were much easier to read than expository-type materials because they tended to elicit greater interest and more memories, while containing fewer distractions interfering with memories or meaning-making" (p. 2,992).

Several teacher researchers reported that using literature with middle or secondary pupils did improve students' enthusiasm and
appreciation of a particular content-area discipline. For example, Kaser (2001) reported successful experiences using literature and poetry for aesthetic possibilities in a science class; Pinchback (2001) successfully used literature in a mathematics class, and Fredericks (2003), a science educator, endorsed the use of narrative fiction through guided reading as part of science curricula. It appears that the use of narrative materials could have a significant role in content area classes, if only teachers committed to employ story.

The use of narrative across disciplines

Although education researchers have concluded that story is a powerful tool to promote learning, do other professions support these conclusions? This section draws upon research in diverse fields such as journalism, medicine, business communication and public relations, and law to suggest that storytelling and story-making have important roles in the training of practitioners. In the field of education, the importance of reading and writing narratives as a component for inservice and preservice teacher training has been well recognized. Tremmel (1993) found abundant research suggesting that reflective practice through the writing, reading and sharing of narratives becomes an important teacher training component. Recently, the use of narrative journals described in studies by Carter (1998); Finan and Sandholtz (1999); Roskos, Vukelich and Risko (2001); and Brenner (2003) found support for the use of narrative reflective writing to help teachers observe and reflect on their own teaching, to note problems, and to assess their own progress. These studies appear to reflect a view that teacher training programs in literacy should 'practice what they preach' and employ active reading and writing strategies to corroborate theoretical knowledge. My own undergraduate and graduate students in literacy are required to keep a reflective journal as a major course requirement. The importance of reflective practice in pedagogy cannot be understated. However, research in various career fields would suggest that story and storytelling are critical in other workplaces as well. This section will survey research in (a) journalism; (b) law and social sciences; (c) nursing education and medicine; and (d) physical sciences.
The field of journalism has embraced narrative as an important aspect of effective communication. Prospective reporters are reminded to employ the techniques of story telling in effective news stories. For example, Poling (2002) offered this suggestion:

Good features that grab a reader and don’t let go have much in common:

The stories tell anecdotes, provide telling quotes, scene setting and tight, lively prose. But what sets top-notch feature writing apart from the pack of promising process is the narrative thread... The narrative thread...weaves the whole story together from beginning to end. That is good writing (p. 36).

In the same article, the Poling points out the importance of narrative to coherence and accessibility for the reader: “A strong, well-written piece can easily fall apart when the story skips around and abandons a strong narrative” (p. 36). An experimental study by Knoblach, Patzig, Mende and Hastall (2004) provided experimental corroboration of this point and noted that journalists are under increasing pressure from competing media to capture the reader’s attention because traditional news stories, written in the inverted pyramid (the most general ideas are expressed in the lead paragraph with increasingly more specific details below) often are at variance with more gripping narrative. Knobloch et al. (2004) had participants read two versions of a story, one in a “linear” structure, and the other in a narrative structure similar to a fiction story. Results suggested that the narrative-type story rated higher among participants when ranked for reader interest. These researchers asked participants to rate narrative versus non-narrative treatments of the same news event on a variety of emotional factors such as suspense, interest, and informativeness. Participants’ ratings for the same event presented in narrative versus non-narrative style were significantly higher than traditional forms of news story. Apparently, the traditional news story, presented in a ‘who’ ‘what’ ‘where’ ‘when’ and ‘why’ format, is less effective and less memorable than narrative.
In a themed issue of *The Journal of Business and Technical Communications*, Blyer and Perkins (1999) expressed the view that the narrative format has many advantages for professional communications as well as research. Kelly and Zak (1999), studied the use of narrative in business communications, concluding that narrative story combines logic and emotion in a way that is inherently argumentative and passionate. These researchers found a common thread between narratives in scientific and legal discourse which they traced to the tradition of folkloric communication. Kelly and Zak (1999) thus believe that successful communicators typically use the narrative to create a powerful message that convinces not through cold hard logic, but through subjective appeals to aesthetic and emotional impulses. This use of narrative story, they believe, was at the heart of lawyer Johnnie Cochran's successful defense in the O. J. Simpson/Nicole Brown Simpson murder case. To Kelly and Zak, Cochran wove a successful narrative of an African-American man being railroaded by white American justice, a convincing narrative that swayed the jury. “Stories and folktales remind us of our personal stories, our lives, our families, our cultures, and the organizations in which we work” (p. 313), they concluded, thus providing another interesting dimension on the power of story.

Feldman, Skoldberg, Brown and Horner (2004) analyzed the use of narrative across disciplines and found that narratives are a potent research tool for understanding organizational change, because “people distill and reflect a particular understanding of social and political relations” (p. 148) and place these in narrative form, especially when organizational change is being studied. Bruner (2004) asserted that narrative is vital to psychotherapy, emphasizing the constructivist (i.e., meaning-making) aspect of patient narrative as the key to understanding the patient. “We have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of narrative” (p. 692), because patient accounts of their history contain thematic content and a consistent point of view. To Bruner (2004), life imitates art, in that the only way someone can make sense of experience is through storytelling.
Nursing education

In both pre- and in-service nursing education, narrative story writing is not only seen as a lens of experience, but as an active teaching/thinking tool. Waddell, Durrant, and Avery (1999) experimental study examined the insertion of narrative methodology into a traditional nursing education program. Waddell et al. (1999) concluded that "participant evaluations of these programs suggests a high level of satisfaction with the use of narrative methodology" (p. 267). Rooda and Nardi (1999) reviewed research literature on the use of narrative reflections in nursing pedagogy and concluded that reflective practice [i.e., narrative writing] is recognized as essential for students’ professional development, and that “writing assignments...be incorporated into any curricular framework” (p. 333). Ironside (2003) developed a new curriculum centered around this approach. In this course, students were asked to write narratives about their course work, as well as attend lectures and take notes. In collecting qualitative data on 14 nursing students, this investigator found that students overwhelmingly felt that the writing and sharing of narratives encouraged active processing and thoughtful analysis. Similarly, Kirkpatrick and Brown (2004) found that writing narratives were effective in helping to sensitize nurses to the concerns and problems of their geriatric patients.

Physical sciences and medicine

Several researchers have affirmed the power of narrative in drawing parallels between scientific discourse and storytelling. Sheehan and Rode (1999) reviewed writings by major scientists such as Newton and Einstein and concluded that narrative has been used by scientists to analyze and build a case for important scientific principles. In the medical arena, Kottow and Kottow (2002) cited literary narratives, such as Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* as examples of how medical science could organize data in story format and apply retrospective analysis. These researchers suggest that as with nurses, stories tempt “the reader to exercise his interpretative skills” (Kottow & Kottow, 2002, p. 45), and a variety of clinical situations to help practitioners identify both good and bad medical practices. Malina (2002) pointed out that “we are made of
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stories...cultural, familiar, interpersonal, psychological, emotional, and biological. Reading these stories from the perspective of the main character is the job of physicians and medical ethicists [and] for 30 years, literature has been infiltrating medical school curriculums, and for about 20 years, ethicists have drawn on methods of literary interpretation” (p. 1,629). Bayoumi and Kopplin (2004), in a critique of case reporting for doctors, argue that storied case reporting, the practice of using a narrative format for reviewing a clinical case, leads to more effective medical diagnosis.

In summary, the cross section of studies presented here support the conclusion that storytelling, story analysis, and narrative writing are important tools of professional development. These are data that the savvy classroom teacher cannot—and should not—ignore in considering when and how to use story material in the classroom other than the English class.

Story as power: Recommendations for the use of narrative across subject-area classrooms

As stated earlier, the purpose of this article is not to simply reaffirm processes or strategies currently seen in language arts classrooms or performed by secondary English teachers. Rather, the purpose of this article is to build a case for using story in content-area reading and writing. The essential question is: how can we employ the most effective materials to facilitate learning? In a review of how teachers use literature, Gavelek and Raphael (1996) suggested that narrative is important not only for literary growth, but for a deeper, more critical understanding of subject-matter knowledge. However, Quinn and Wilson (1997) found that classroom teachers faced with the demands of high-stakes testing, packed curricula, and limited resources have not embraced the use of literature or narrative in their classes. Faced with empirical evidence on the power of story, isn’t it time to take a fresh look at the use of strategies and techniques which harness the power of story for student engagement and long-term memory making?

One such strategy would be to de-emphasize traditional textbooks in favor of alternative texts. Richgels et al. (1993) cited concerns about
textbooks that are poorly written or poorly organized, too abstract and conceptually too challenging for certain pupils. Alternative texts, such as the Michener award-winning series of history textbooks by Hakim (1999) focus on narrative materials, primary sources and artifacts. In a monograph about Hakim's method of textbook writing, Hakim urges "teaching reading using challenging, action-filled non-fiction...history as narrative...and science presented as a quest" (p. 3). The organization of Hakim's textbook series reflects a sensitivity and awareness of the importance of character and theme and a focus on teaching subject matter as story. The First Americans, An Age of Extremes, War, Peace and All That Jazz, are but a few representative titles for volumes on the age of exploration, westward expansion, and the early twentieth century respectively. Each Hakim book follows a historically sequential and accurate order; however, individual chapters are written as stand-alone stories to emphasize specific characters, themes, conflicts, and resolution. Each page of Hakim text is a split page, with the primary text, written in narrative format yet containing background information and critical concepts, and a secondary text containing pictures, artifacts with captions, maps or subsidiary stories within the story. The absence of end-of-chapter study questions does not compromise factual accuracy or historical content; instead, it focuses the reader on a story, not a hunt for fact questions for homework assignments.

What about the content-area teacher who is unwilling or unable, for a wide variety of reasons, to use alternative texts? Emphasizing story format requires teachers to make some selective shifts in the types of questions they pose to students, and apply a transactional approach to instruction and assessment. In traditional textbook assignments, students are encouraged to read individually in the search for isolated facts or bits of information. However, Pardo (2004) outlines the Transactional Strategy Instruction (TSI) which is an alternative strategy for working with textbooks:

- encourage readers to make sense of text that connect new content and prior knowledge;
- work with small reading groups to collaboratively make meaning from selections;
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- scaffold support, and gradually encourage students to make their own decisions about how and when to apply procedures such as thinking aloud, demonstrating and creating meaning; and
- make reading/writing connections visible; encourage students to react personally and authentically to what they read.

In this manner, students read (a) selectively through guided assignments to build understanding of key concepts; (b) specifically, to analyze primary documents, statistical tables and maps; and (c) critically, to compare and contrast what is read to their own feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. In place of traditional end-of-chapter textbook questions, the teacher might pose a series of what if or hypothetical questions, in the manner of open-ended question strategies suggested by Cardillichio and Field (1997). For example, “What if General Wolfe had lost to General Montcalm in the battle of Quebec on the Plains of Abraham?” By asking students to re-write history, or engage in hypothetical speculation, students gain a critical stance and view textbook information not as gospel truth, but as one writer’s selective story of events or phenomena, the way textbooks were intended.

Since the story format contains a familiar and accessible structure for students, content area teachers might modify assessment practices that de-emphasize the fact-driven ‘who, what, where, when and why’ approach and instead apply a story-grammar approach to reading, discussing and writing about textbook information. Thus, the content-area teacher might wish to:

- encourage students to identify a problem or question in the selection;
- locate and identify how to solve the problem;
- apply and demonstrate alternate solutions or alternate interpretations;
- react, write and discuss a personal reaction, such as how this information could be used in the future.

The use of story maps, structured graphic organizers or story maps such as the story face (Staal, 2000) could help students identify problem, conflict, solution, characters in a wide range of content-area non-fiction
materials and subjects. Such a framework should be used consistently to help students develop habits for analyzing information, solving a problem, or analyzing historical events, geometric patterns, relationships, statistical tables, or artifacts.

With use of narrative writing in the forefront of training in many disciplines, the content area teacher may make use of a 'writing to learn' stance in the classroom. Learning logs are form of narrative writing that has been in use across the curriculum for many years. Commander and Smith (1996) have indicated that learning logs have various purposes and formats yet all of these facilitating cognitive monitoring, the 'thinking about thinking' necessary for subject-matter mastery. Teachers might wish to have students keep journals that emphasize a narrative format. Students could be asked to put themselves into a historical period or recast themselves as a character in a story from the past. For example, assign an underground railroad log and ask the student to write as if they were: (a) a former slave being transported to freedom; (b) a guide along the underground railroad; (c) the homeowner of a station along the route North. I recall a global studies teacher who asked students to write a diary of their year in the Peace Corps in a third-world nation. The student was able to create a character, integrate historical information and setting, and develop his or her own conflict, problem and solutions. Not only did the assignment result in students becoming aware of history as story, but it strengthened their metacognitive awareness of how historians work.

Learning logs are another type of reflective writing structure, applicable to a wide variety of disciplines, including mathematics. The goal of the log is to create a narrative so that the student can participate in his or her own story as a learner. Learning logs are among the various forms of written communication which have been widely adopted in mathematics (McIntosh & Draper, 2001) even before the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Standards for School Mathematics formally recommended written communication in the math class. Fortescue (1994); Elliott (1996); Quinn and Wilson (1997); and Pugalee (1997) are several teachers and researchers who have recommended learning logs or math journals in which a student indicates progress,
queries, and solutions to problems. Slowly, the idea that learning logs are time consuming diversions from the curriculum is fading away.

Lyons (2003) recommends that struggling readers need special approaches that reflect emotional as well as cognitive support through teacher scaffolding. Bibliotherapy, or the use of reading to help emotionally disturbed or reluctant readers acquire self-esteem and competence, is another reason why narrative materials should be used in the classroom. Huber and Clandenin (2004) endorse the use of narratives to help students develop understanding of their own lives, and that this unfolding understanding in turn stimulates further reading. Accordingly, these two researchers outline a series of scaffolding techniques so that the teacher might engage in narrative inquiry by:

- creating spaces where children can ask questions about their own life texts and those of classmates;
- helping students to see they are the authors of their own lives;
- providing ways to have students tell, write, paint and photograph who they are and who they are becoming;
- taking and using photos of children to help them tell a story; and
- helping students fill their journals with narratives of themselves and their experiences.

Reader’s theatre, the dramatic interpretation of a play script through oral interpretive reading (Walker, 2005), can be an effective way to harness the power of story though interactive reading. Creative writing or mini-plays, and creative writing can serve as culminating activities in the literature or social studies class. A content area teacher might want to assign historical novels or work collaboratively with a language arts specialist in an interdisciplinary context to create talk shows or panel discussions in which a historical figure reveals his or her own life, transforms history into my story. The use of museum displays incorporates elements of artifact, story and narrative to the re-creation of authentic historical or scientific display. Students may need to refer to primary and secondary textbook sources to read for factual information; however, in the process of developing a finished project and creating a story, students will improve their aesthetic appreciation and emotional connection to the story.
Daniels and Steineke (2004) recommend the use of literature circles, where students choose their own reading materials and form small groups of 3-6. The small groups permit a comfortable interaction level and because they are based on choice and interest, not ability, honest responses, personal connections and reader-generated questions, not teacher-generated judgments or assessments, are the starting points for discussion. Walker (2005) indicated that the use of literature logs and readers theatre activities can be easily integrated into the literature circle approach, thereby strengthening the writing/thinking component and providing the teacher with additional assessment material. These strategies are similar to content area classrooms where students are asked to analyze a primary historical document or artifact, scientific data or phenomena, or demonstrate mathematical/geometric relationships. The key is authentic opportunities to have students read, react, and share their own thoughts. Such activities do not require massive instructional time; however, if done consistently and with careful teacher facilitation, they can galvanize student attention and memory-making.

What is the moral of this tale of research at variance with classroom practice? As Willingham (2004) indicated, teachers should use story and use it often to help students learn and remember. Why is story a forgotten entity after elementary school? Students who can remember the rhymes and lyrics of a rap song or the exploits of a comic book character certainly have the capacity to remember the stories of human achievement and events. Recognizing the power of story and using it in the classroom gives teachers an effective teaching tool to promote active learning. It is up to the teacher practitioner to give this tale a happy ending.

References

Harnessing the Power of Story


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