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# Sharing Multicultural Literature Through Storytelling

Florence M. Newell

Literature can be used as a means to support children's development in the areas of cognition, language, social mores, creativity, personality, and aesthetics (Glazer, 1986). As the children in public schools today become more culturally and linguistically different, the diversity of literature should be expanded to reflect these differences among learners. Each child brings unique literacy strengths and serves as a resource to help teachers and other students understand one another (Templeton, 1991). Sharing literature from different cultures or literature that includes characters with different cultural or ethnic backgrounds offers a variety of benefits for teachers and students. Using multicultural literature increases cultural awareness, helps children better understand themselves and others, develops awareness of different languages, allows children to identify with the people who created the stories, helps children discover themes and values important to people today, expands knowledge of geography and natural history, develops knowledge of history and social changes, and builds appreciation of literary techniques (Bromley, 1992; Sylvester, 1989).

Using multicultural literature also nurtures the affective and imaginative uses of language that children bring to

school. Children's facility with affective and imaginative use of language can be used to teach about the world and our shared cultures. Stories can be used to teach many subjects, not only reading and language arts, but also social studies, mathematics, science, music and art. Such use will enable children to become familiar with the conventional forms of literature and drama — the two forms of language most closely associated with the affective and imaginative uses of language (Finn, 1993).

One method of sharing multicultural literature is through storytelling. This article describes the benefits of storytelling, activities which foster storytelling, and techniques of storytelling for teachers and students.

Traditionally storytelling is defined as "the oral interpretation of literature and folklore" (Rubin, 1990, p. 94). Based on this definition, all that is needed is the storyteller, the story, a place to tell the story, and a receptive audience. However, some people today combine storytelling with creative drama or use puppets or other props to help them convey their story. Whatever technique of storytelling the storyteller uses, the key is in finding a story that is just right — a story that the storyteller enjoys (Rubin, 1990).

Storytelling is an ancient art that is practiced by millions of amateurs (nearly every mom and dad and five-year-old) and a few professionals (Finn, 1993). Storytelling is the basis of most folklore. Tales, mythology, and epics were developed, spread geographically, and transcended time through oral sharing (Tiedt, 1979).

### **Benefits of storytelling**

According to Finn (1993), the three historic purposes of storytelling are to teach, to entertain, and to transmit culture.

Regardless of the purpose, children benefit from hearing stories. The following is a summary of benefits derived from hearing or telling stories.

Storytelling is entertaining and stimulates children's imaginations (Hoskisson and Tompkins, 1987). It conveys information that will be essential in the development of their understanding of the world in general and literacy in particular (Rubin, 1990). Storytelling promotes understanding of the oral tradition in literature. In many societies, young children have been initiated into their literacy heritage through storytelling. Unfortunately today, few children have such experiences (Norton, 1993). With regard to literacy, storytelling conveys the structure or form of narratives and the forms and rhythms of effective language (Peck, 1989). Storytelling motivates children to read, and can introduce them to the values and literacy tradition of different cultures (Cothem, 1992; Templeton, 1991). It expands their language abilities and helps them internalize the characteristics of stories (Morrow, 1989). Development of vocabulary and of syntactic complexities in oral language is enhanced as children become storytellers (Strickland and Morrow, 1989). As children prepare a story, they practice reading skills and various oral language abilities.

Storytelling extends children's enjoyment of literature and helps them develop poise and linguistic fluency (Tiedt, 1979). Storytelling provides the opportunity to involve children actively in the literacy experience. An adult storyteller can use gestures and action that involve children in the story. Seeing an adult tell a story provides the stimulus for children's storytelling. Seeing a teacher engage in storytelling helps children understand that storytelling is a worthwhile activity, and motivates them to try telling stories themselves (Norton, 1993).

## Activities which foster storytelling

Teachers must first be storytellers themselves (Wendelin, 1991), and invite others into the classroom to share stories — other teachers, librarians, administrators, parents and students. Through observing storytellers, children acquire some of the techniques used in this art (Norton, 1993). This section describes activities using multicultural literature which encourage children to become storytellers. Figure 1 provides guidelines useful for both teachers and students.

As teachers model storytelling, they should introduce children to authentic storytelling traditions. By explaining and demonstrating storytelling traditions like the two listed below, multicultural understandings are enhanced and children may adapt these traditions and use them during their storytelling activities.

The use of story nets is a West African storytelling tradition. Kingsley (1964) reported that minstrels set up story nets with many objects hanging on them in the village. Listeners would select the objects the minstrels would use to tell the story. Also, a net or web is used in many African tales. One example is *A Story, A Story* as retold by Gail Haley (1970). If *A Story, A Story* can't be found, substitute *Spider and the Sky God* (1993) by Deborah M. Newton Chocolate. This tale explains how stories were brought to earth by Ananse, the spider man. Throughout the story, Ananse used his web, trickery, and wit to capture a python, a fairy, and some hornets, and delivers them to the Sky God for payment of all the stories he possessed. In telling this story, a model of Spiderman, a rubber snake, a hornet's nest and a doll can be attached to the storyteller's net. A teacher can begin creating a story net in a corner of the classroom by hanging a fish net and attaching objects which are mentioned in stories.

**Figure 1**  
***Guidelines for Storytelling for Teachers and Students\****

1. Select a story you enjoy that is well written. Choose a story that is appropriate for the age and experience of the audience. Consider the mood you wish to create and the time you have available. Select a story that has a small number of well defined characters. Useful books include: *The Stories Julian Tells* by Ann Cameron (1981); *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* told by Virginia Hamilton (1985); *The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* as told by Julius Lester (1987) and *Reflections of a Black Cowboy* by Robert Miller (1991).
2. Read the story aloud a few times until you are familiar with the characters and the story line. Don't try to memorize the author's exact words. Use your words to tell the story you have painted in your mind.
3. Read the story again to determine if you have remembered the important actions and sequence of events.
4. Tell the story into a tape recorder or note key information on file cards which will become the nucleus of your storyteller's file. Make only brief notes so you don't become dependent upon them.
5. Read the story again. Listen to your audiotape or review your note cards and make adjustments.
6. Tell the story again, using your voice to bring the characters and actions to life. Try adjusting the pitch and volume of your voice to depict the actions of different characters.
7. Tell the story in front of a mirror to practice your posture, eye contact and gestures. When you do use gestures, make exaggerated movements.
8. Practice the beginning of the story one more time. Getting off to a good start will help you relax while you tell the story.
9. Share the story with an audience. Remember to slow down and breathe.
10. Reflect on your storytelling. Evaluate your performance.
11. Select other stories. Build a repertoire of stories.

\* These guidelines, compiled from the work of Bromley, 1992; Norton, 1993; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Tompkins & Hoskisson, 1991; Rubin, 1990, are useful for both teachers and students as they prepare to be storytellers and develop their storytelling skills.

Throughout the year, as stories are told additional objects can be placed on the story net (Imdieke, 1990). These objects may then be used for telling the original stories or as props to support teachers and students as they create new stories.

According to Pellowski (1990), an East Indian storytelling tradition is to illustrate stories on scrolls. As a response to hearing an Indian tale, *The Blind Men and the Elephant* retold by Lillian Quigley (1959), students can draw pictures of the characters and important events of the story, place them sequentially on a scroll, and use the scroll to support their storytelling. Following this East Indian tradition, students can then travel from village to village (classroom to classroom) and share their stories. Preparing a story scroll provides children with opportunities to demonstrate that they possess a sense of story, can sequence events, and identify main ideas (Imdieke, 1990). (Cloth has been traditionally used; however, fax machine paper or freezer paper which is already on a roll can be used as inexpensive scroll paper).

One of the best ways to encourage students to participate in storytelling is to invite them to perform the story or to act it out. *Peter's Chair* by Ezra Jack Keats (1967) is an example of a story which lends itself to being acted out by students. Through narrating the story, students can perform the actions of the characters as the story is being told.

*When I Was Young in the Mountains*, an Appalachian story by Cynthia Rylant (1982), is an example of a story which can be used to involve students during the storytelling session. The line "When I was young in the mountains," is repeated throughout the story. As the story is being told, the storyteller can step forward to signal when the children are to say the line.

*Ty's One-Man Band* by Mildred Pitts Walter (1980) is a story about a boy named Ty who meets Andro, a one-man band. Andro agrees to perform for Ty and his friends if Ty will supply the instruments — a comb, a washboard, two wooden spoons, and a pail. Near the end of the story Andro comes to town, Ty has gathered the objects, and Andro makes beautiful music using those objects as instruments. At the end of the story Andro invites Ty and his friends to play the instruments. The students in the classroom can take turns making music. The teacher can place additional objects around the room to be played as instruments so more students can participate. It is a great way to conclude a story-telling session because the audience can actually help with the finale.

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