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# **Students as Storytellers in the Classroom**

**Karla Hawkins Wendelin**

Engaging students in storytelling activities develops communication skills and encourages shared learning experiences. Telling stories enhances oral language and sharpens listening. Speaking ability is improved through attention to articulation, clarity, and volume. Poise and confidence in speaking before a group are acquired in the accepting environment of the classroom. Students experiment with various intonations and reflect a range of emotions in their voices. They are faced with the need to select just the right word to convey a thought. As they manipulate language, they also listen to, evaluate and appreciate the expression of others.

Although telling tales of one sort or another is part of everyday life, getting students to view themselves as storytellers engaged in the art of storytelling takes patience and preparation. Modeling by the teacher is essential. Teachers need to introduce students to a wide range of story possibilities and the numerous opportunities in which the telling might take place. Familiar favorites from folk literature; anecdotes from the lives of real people, past and present; stories that teach a scientific concept or reinforce aspects of health and safety; stories that introduce a social studies unit, and stories that entertain on special days should be part of the teacher's repertoire. Students need to

observe and listen to teachers telling many stories before they begin to tell their own.

A variety of classroom activities involving students in less formal ways can serve as preparation for actual storytelling. Several of these “warm-up” experiences are described below.

### **Participation stories**

In participation stories, the storyteller assumes the major role, but members of the audience are actively involved in portions of the telling. A set of cues and responses, in the form of actions, words (as in a refrain), or sounds, are established prior to the telling. Children listen for the cues as they appear in the story and respond accordingly. Cues should be explained and rehearsed ahead of time. Most children can remember seven or eight cues. With preschool or kindergarten children, however, three or four cues is usually the maximum.

Stories that are familiar to students, such as “Three Billy Goats Gruff,” may be adapted to participation stories. Many children’s books are also appropriate for active participation. For example, students will enjoy creating the variety of sounds made by a group of animals as they elude a determined crocodile in Gail Jorgensen’s *Crocodile Beat* (1989). The field trip to the farm in *The Day Jimmy’s Boa Ate the Wash* by Trinka Hakes Noble (1980) will be even zanier with children making schoolbus, tractor, and animal sounds and screaming along with the farmer’s wife. Pamela Allen’s *Bertie and the Bear* (1984) invites not only making sounds of an assortment of musical instruments but also creative movement. Father Bear is disturbed in every room in the house by a variety of noises when all he wants to do is sleep in *Peace At Last* by Jill Murphy (1980).

Poetry also lends itself well to audience participation. Poets such as Jack Prelutsky and Shel Silverstein whose work is popular with children have many poems in their collections that adapt well to movement and repetition of sounds and refrains. Both oral language and listening skills are stimulated through participation stories. These activities work well with students of all ages and are especially useful with reluctant readers and children whose English language backgrounds are limited.

### **Wordless books**

There are considerable differences in the complexity of wordless books, so their use is appropriate across a wide age range. Some wordless books tell a story through the illustrations. Others are collections of individual illustrations that are tied together by the presentation of a concept to be taught. Both types may stimulate storytelling.

Young children who tell the wordless story *Deep in the Forest* by Brinton Turkle (1976) (a twist to the "Three Bears" tale in which a young bear is the intruder in the home of three people) are likely to include details such as eating "porridge," and use deep "Papa" and squeaky "baby" voices in their tellings. The highly detailed illustrations in Peter Spier's *Rain* (1982) and in both *Sunshine* (1981) and *Moonlight* (1982) by Jan Ormerod provide stories suitable for telling by primary grade children and offer opportunities for them to relate similar personal experiences.

Older students could use Anno's "travel" books as stimuli for storytelling. In *Anno's USA* (1983), for example, historical landmarks and events, village scenes and rural landscapes are interspersed with the vitality of contemporary New York City as bits and pieces of American art and literature are liberally sprinkled across the pages. John

Goodall's Edwardian books provide the setting for stories about England in an earlier time. His wordless paintings in *Above and Below Stairs* (1983) contrast English aristocracy with the serving class from the Middle Ages to present day, thus teaching history while allowing for some lively storytelling. David Wiesner's *Free Fall* (1988) is a young boy's dream fantasy of exotic places and creatures inspired by objects surrounding his bed. Images that shift and change, places that emerge from a book of maps, and chess pieces that come alive in this book may prompt several storytelling adventures.

In addition to telling a story from a wordless book to an eager group of listeners, students might also put their stories on cassette tapes for the classroom listening center. In this way, listeners may hear several different versions of the same story, thus realizing what real storytellers know: a single story may be told in several ways.

### **Traveling tales**

In a traveling tale, several people are involved in the telling of the same story. Students must listen to everyone who precedes them so that they are ready to continue the plot of the story. The tale may be told one word at a time. Since each participant adds only one word or a punctuation mark, these stories are brief, usually relating a single incident. Tales may also be told in longer segments as one student tells part of the story and stops at any time, passing the story on to the next person to continue. Time limits may need to be instituted as part of this activity to prevent an individual from dominating the telling. A good model for storytelling in longer segments is provided in the book, *The Tyrannosaurus Game* by Steven Kroll (1976). Bored by the weather, a group of children take their teacher's suggestion of playing a game by starting a story about a tyrannosaurus

who comes to their city. Each child contributes to the story until a satisfactory conclusion is reached.

Another possibility for the traveling tale is the use of a Story Box. The Story Box contains a ball of yarn or twine with knots tied at intervals. The first teller pulls the end of the yarn from a hole in the box and relates a story until he or she comes to the first knot. The box is immediately passed to the next storyteller who talks until another knot is reached. Knots may be placed varying distances apart, thus randomly allowing students to contribute a great deal or small portions of a story while necessitating attentive listening.

### **Words, objects, situations**

Unusual words or ordinary words in unusual combinations, unique objects or assortments of objects, and contrived situations may stimulate storytelling.

Students may work together in small groups to create a story using a specific group of words. Each group is given a card with five or six words on it and time to plan a story. Each word on the card must be used in the story. Cards might include words groups such as: 1) *sword, ransom, witch, path, beautiful, cheese*; 2) *curtain, table, puppy, spaghetti, clown, roof*; 3) *moonlight, shoes, shipwreck, girl, candle, spinach*. A teller is appointed by the group to tell their story to the rest of the class. As regrouping is done for future use of this activity, different storytellers should be selected.

Objects may encourage storytelling. Using a variety of hats, for example, students may each select one and tell a story about the person who wore it. A similar activity may be done with shoes. These kinds of experiences help students

develop different characterizations, which is an important aspect of storytelling. Single objects that seem to have a story within them, such as a large, rusty old key, a well worn teddy bear, or a multi-colored stone, are useful for prompting creative tales. Objects that are not readily identifiable by the students usually elicit interesting stories as well.

“What if...” questions allow students to use their problem-solving abilities, creativity, and some common sense to develop short story situations. Teachers might pose a “what if...” question in the morning or at the beginning of a class period to allow think and talk time among the students and call for the stories later in the day. The length of these stories and the amount of detail included will vary with the nature of the question and the age of the students. A group of teachers generated the following “What if...” situations:

*your mother were president of the United States  
everyone in the world had the same name  
your dog started talking  
it rained popcorn  
all the clocks stopped  
you were a book  
there were no colors  
a computer was programming you  
no one ever smiled*

With a little exposure to this kind of story, students will soon be creating “What if...” situations themselves and offering them to the class for storytelling.

### **Stories in songs**

Songs often tell stories, and they involve the entire group in a single storytelling activity. Folk songs, such as “Billy Boy,” “Clementine,” and “Sweet Betsy From Pike,” use several verses to tell the tale. There are generally multiple

versions of these songs, as well, for students to compare. Some story songs teach concepts, such as the historical information presented in "The Erie Canal" and "The Star Spangled Banner," and the introduction to other cultures in "Waltzing Matilda" and "Always Room for One More."

The repetition and cumulative nature of some songs, as well as their familiarity, allow for extension into other types of storytelling activities. Songs such as "I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly" and "Over in the Meadow" adapt well to flannel board stories. Students can dramatize, dance to, or play games associated with other songs, such as "Over the River and Through the Wood," "Skip to my Lou," and "Farmer in the Dell." Small groups of older students who are familiar with a number of folk tunes might choose a story and set it to music. Folk tales, because their plots are sequential and easy to follow, are well suited to this activity. In order to create their "folk songs," the students must select the essential elements of a tale and "retell" it, adapting their words to the rhythmical pattern of a known tune.

### **Students as storytellers**

Students need to study the art of storytelling. As they gain confidence with the informal activities, teachers can introduce the telling of stories to a group. Cross-age arrangements in which older students prepare stories for telling to children in lower grades provide a purpose for the task and an audience as well. Students will need some assistance in selecting a story. Discussion of the types of stories that they have enjoyed the most, characteristics of a good story, and possible sources for stories, aids the selection process. Teachers should share practical hints that have worked for them regarding story preparation and practice. Students might work in small groups critiquing



each other on use of voice and expression. The classroom climate while students are working on storytelling should be accepting and non-threatening.

The students themselves should establish the storytelling schedule so that they may tell their stories when they feel they are ready. In order that a few storytellers do not dominate the activity, a simple policy that everyone should have the opportunity to tell a story before someone has a second turn is effective. Reluctant tellers may need additional exposure to storytelling, more assistance with preparation, and time, combined with consistent encouragement to share their stories. As the model of effective storytelling, the teacher should continue to tell stories even after students are regularly telling stories themselves.

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