

The Effectiveness of Storytelling

Information, when packaged in story form comes to life for adults and children alike. In the 1920s through the 1950s, radio *mastered* the art of storytelling. During the same period, the silver screen brought yet another dimension—pictures. Television followed. While these media have become hugely successful as a means of entertaining and conveying information, storytelling as a method of stimulating the imagination has been all but lost, but for that special grandparent, teacher, or the professional storyteller.

In the words of professional storyteller, Harlynn Geisler, “Children today are losing the ability to imagine, to create their own images. Television and picture books give them someone else’s images and tell them precisely what those images are doing. A storyteller speaks simply, though often stretching the children’s vocabulary through poetic use of language and through use of foreign and archaic words. The child has to elaborate and embroider the simple terms used in the stories — to truly see in the mind’s eye a princess ‘as tall and slender as the reeds that grow by Loch Erne’ or a bed ‘as soft and white as the heart’s desire.’ If children hear exciting stories from books beyond their reading level, they will want to learn to read better so that they can read such fascinating volumes. Storytellers as purveyors of literature are role models of readers” (Geisler, 1999).

“Storytelling is an art form that has been a most effective teaching tool for at least as long as history has been recorded.” — Jim Lord

Many studies have been conducted to scientifically document the effectiveness of storytelling as a teaching tool. Following are portions of a public domain article published in September 1988 by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication:

Storytelling; Its Wide-ranging Impact in the Classroom

by Nola Kortner Aiex

Storytelling is a creative art form that has entertained and informed across centuries and cultures (Fisher, 1985), and its instructional potential continues to serve teachers. Storytelling, or oral literature, has many of its roots in the attempt to explain life or the mysteries of the world and the universe—to try to make sense out of things (Tway, 1985). In doing so, the characters and themes in the stories have become cultural and often cross-cultural archetypes of historic and continuing importance (Lasser, 1979). Even in today’s technological world, we have not changed to such a degree that the archetypes presented in traditional oral literature are no longer applicable (Livo and Rietz, 1986).

Rosen (1986) enumerates several factors about the universality of narrative that merit consideration: 1) human beings dream and speak to themselves in narrative (inner narrative speech), 2) a basic form of narrative is not only telling but also retelling, and 3) narrative is oral in the sense that an individual can engage with it fully without encountering it in written form. Storytelling, probably the oldest form of narrative in the world, is not the same as reading aloud, because in storytelling, the interaction between teller and listener is immediate, personal, active, and direct. Preece (1987) discusses 14 narrative forms which children use routinely and regularly.

Storytelling in the Classroom

In 1984, the Commission on Literature of the National Council of Teachers of English applauded an emerging trend in schools and communities which emphasize storytelling as literature (Suhor, 1984). Numerous articles and papers entered in the ERIC database between 1985 and 1988 have discussed the benefits of storytelling in developing language abilities, appreciation of literature, critical thinking and comprehension, and understanding of community and self. In discussing how storytelling involves the control of language for narrative, for example, Wyatt, et al. (1986) describe the application of storytelling in teaching children to write as though they were doing so for media. Alparaque (1988) notes another important benefit related to the development of the appreciation of literature—the power of storytelling to bind attention and to bridge real and imaginary worlds.

George and Schaer (1986) investigated the effects of three mediums for presenting literature to children and discovered that storytelling and dramatization were significantly more effective in facilitating recall of prose content than was television. These findings indicated that storytelling is a viable method for stimulating children's imaginations, ultimately leading to a higher cognitive level in student responses. Reinehr (1987) discussed ways to use mythic literature to teach children about themselves and to help them write their own stories and legends. For very young children, the sequencing of events or the shaping of stories may be difficult, as children tend to ramble. However, sharing stories can give youngsters more of a "sense of story"—an awareness that can help them in both reading and writing. In reading, for example, a sense of story can help children to predict and know what to expect, and to read with more awareness of cause and effect, sequence, and other story factors related to comprehension (Kempter, 1986; Trabasso and Van Den Broek, 1985). In writing, children learn to apply such structures while telling their own stories and giving shape to their experiences. (Tway, 1985)

Perhaps storytelling's greatest value for a teacher is its effectiveness in fostering a relaxed and intimate atmosphere in the classroom. Scott (1985), an experienced Australian teacher/ storyteller, explains how this practical and general objective can relate to the other benefits from using storytelling: It can 1) introduce children to a range of story experiences; 2) provide young students with models of story patterns, themes, characters, and incidents to help them in their own writing, oral language, and thinking; 3) nurture and encourage a sense of humor in children; 4) help put children's own words in perspective; 5) increase knowledge and understanding of other places, races, and beliefs; 6) introduce new ideas and be used to question established concepts without threat to the individual; 7) lead to discussions that are far ranging and often more satisfying than those arising from formal lessons; and 8) serve as the most painless way of teaching children to listen, to concentrate, and to follow the thread and logic of an argument.

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Additional References:

Geisler (1999) *Why Have Storytelling in the Schools?* Portions reprinted by permission. Harlynn Geisler <http://storyteller.swiftsite.com>. Storytelling in San Diego, Southern California, and the world. Especially Storytelling School Assemblies in San Diego County.