

## **The Power of Story: Using Storytelling to Improve Literacy Learning**

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In order for schools to improve the literacy learning of all students, different pedagogical strategies need to be employed. Using storytelling in the classroom is one way to address literacy development by improving oral language, reading comprehension, and writing. Because of the interrelated nature of the processes involved in reading and writing, storytelling is an effective pedagogical strategy that can be woven into instruction to increase students' competencies in all areas. This paper will address how storytelling can be used as a pedagogical strategy in the classroom to enhance literacy learning in the areas of reading and writing.

From the moment children enter kindergarten until their last exam in high school, students are being instructed and assessed on their reading and writing ability. Most states address the importance of literacy with standards for proficiency at each grade level in areas of oral language, reading, and writing. Even with the goal of improving literacy achievement in the forefront of recent No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, many children are still struggling to read at a basic level (Haycock & Huang, 2001). Haycock and Huang (2001) found that only half of all white seventeen year olds, less than one-quarter of Latino seventeen year olds, and less than one-fifth of African- American seventeen year olds can read at the level assessed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) reported that, "one out of every five of our nation's school-age children suffer from reading failures" (ASHA, n.d., Facts on Literacy Section). With so many students struggling to become literate, steps must be taken to improve all students' reading ability. If something is not done, the achievement gap between proficient and underachieving readers will most likely continue to grow.

Many researchers have surveyed students and found a high correlation between good readers

and good writers, as well as poor readers and poor writers (Moore, 1995). Others have carried this connection further and believe that, "reading like a writer allows one to actually become a writer" (Langer & Flihan, 2000, p. 126). This shift has moved current thinking beyond the relationship or connection between reading and writing and towards literacy. Cairney (1992) defines literacy as "a social practice that takes many forms each with specific purposes and contexts" (pg. 76).

Literacy is an important issue for everyone because our success as a society depends on the innovation of the next generation. Employees in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to have greater literacy skills than in other time periods, as the average job requires literacy in the area of technology, as well as traditional forms of reading, writing, and communicating. According to Cairney (1992), the skills of literacy include not only reading and writing, but also responding appropriately to a variety of messages which include e-mails that incorporate pictures, as well as text to help convey meaning to others, and the ability to persuade, inform, and express our emotions. In addition, poor reading and writing skills can have a detrimental impact with 75% of school dropouts reporting reading problems and 50% of adults with criminal records identified as having reading difficulties (ASHA, n.d.).

Although some progress has been made to improve student literacy through NCLB, many students are still struggling as noted above. NAEP reported that, "Reading skills are improving for both fourth- and eighth-graders...many student groups made gains in both grades; however, these gains were not always accompanied by significant closing of racial/ethnic and gender gaps" (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007, p. 2). For instance, the percentage of fourth grade students performing at a basic level increased from 62% in 1992 to 67% in 2007, but there was still a 27-point gap between white and black students. In addition, ASHA (n.d.)

found that if a student is not reading fluently by 4<sup>th</sup> grade they would be likely to have difficulty reading into adulthood. Their analysis also showed that 41% of 4<sup>th</sup> grade boys and 35% of girls read below the basic level, but this figure jumps to a staggering 70% in some low-income urban areas.

### *Storytelling*

Engaging in storytelling activities is a way to motivate even the most reluctant reader or writer. Storytelling is defined as, “relating a tale to one or more listeners through voice and gesture” (National Council of Teachers of English, 1992, p. 1). Because storytelling relies on both the listener and the teller, this strategy utilizes the social element of language. Researchers have found that literacy instruction is most effective when developed through social interaction and collaboration with others (Dugan, 1997). This pedagogical strategy capitalizes on students’ desire to talk and interact with others. In fact, some researchers have found that the weakest readers and writers are often the most adept at storytelling (NCTE, 1992). Building on the synergistic relationship between language in an interactive way, teachers and students can use storytelling to improve literacy learning.

Storytelling finds its disciplinary inheritance in the humanities and aesthetic ways of knowing. Wikipedia (n.d.) defines the humanities as, “those academic disciplines which study the human condition, using methods that are largely analytic, critical, or speculative, as distinguished from the mainly empirical approaches of the natural and social sciences.” (Humanities, ¶ 1). The fields historically incorporated into the humanities include the classics, history, languages and literature, law, performing arts, philosophy, religion, and visual arts (Wikipedia, n.d.; Ullman, 1946). Drawing heavily on the area of the performing arts, storytellers learn to use their own body as the medium for their art. Within the performing arts, theatre is the branch that storytelling is most closely associated with as it specifically involves the use of speech, facial gestures, music, and dance (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Using the medium of the performing arts, Remenyi (2005) reports that storytelling is a

fundamental method for sharing knowledge among people as it allows participants to be transported to another time and place. Through the use of descriptive oral language, students are able to have an enhanced experience with literature (Eisner, 1985). A significant component of this experience is the aesthetic way of knowing. According to Wikipedia (n.d.), the aesthetic is defined by scholars as, “a critical reflection on art, culture and nature” (Aesthetic, ¶ 1). It is this reflective process that is believed to lead to new ways of viewing and perceiving the world (Wikipedia, n.d.). Merriam-Webster (n.d.) rounds out the meaning by defining aesthetic as, “responsive to or appreciative of what is pleasurable to the senses.” Eisner (1985) identifies the two most important contributions of aesthetic ways of knowing for the field of education as the referential and the consummatory functions. He describes the referential function as students’ ability to appreciate and understand the qualities conveyed in learning. The consummatory function is understanding the importance of the journey and being able to find joy in the inquiry along the way (Eisner, 1985). Through storytelling these functions have the opportunity to flourish as students develop their literacy skills within the classroom.

### *Research on Storytelling*

Several studies have been conducted regarding the effectiveness of the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy. According to a study conducted by Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer and Lowrance (2004), researchers studied the impact of storytelling and reading stories on the development of language and comprehension of children ages three to five. The participants were divided into two groups but the same twenty-four stories were heard by all students. The first group had the stories told to them. The second group listened to the stories as they were read from a book. The results showed that both groups benefited from their instruction. The group who heard the stories told experienced greater comprehension as demonstrated in their retelling of the stories (Isbell et al, 2004). The storytelling group was more able to identify the setting, the moral of the story, and the characters from the stories. According to Isbell et al. (2004), storytellers tend to use more repetition, sounds, and

gestures than a person merely reading a story. They also suggest that storytelling requires a greater use of the visual imagination than in story reading as there are no pictures to share in storytelling. Storytelling is also considered a more personal experience as the listener frequently has greater levels of eye contact with the teller as compared to listening to a story read from a book. The authors report that storytelling is considered an effective strategy for developing listening skills and keeping students engaged (Isbell et al., 2004).

Mello (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of eight studies regarding the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy. Her analysis included information from pre and post interviews with participants, student retellings, measures of fluency, and writing samples from the students. The studies demonstrated that the literacy of the participants was enhanced in the academic areas of fluency, vocabulary acquisition, writing, and recall. Additionally, she found that storytelling served to improve self-awareness, visual imagery, and cultural knowledge.

The human factor that emerges from instruction in storytelling led researchers to consider it's cultural elements. Eder's (2007) examination of Navajo storytelling practices revealed that in the Navajo culture, stories are used to help construct important concepts and as the instrument through which knowledge is passed from one generation to the next. She also learned that the stories seemed to focus on key concepts such as respect and moral responsibility to oneself, others, and the environment and that the stories were primarily told by the elders. Eder notes that families who have used stories to help their children learn important life lessons are considered to have raised their children properly. As part of the study, Eder interviewed David Martinez, a Navajo storyteller. He expressed that a Navajo person who knows legends, folktales, and ceremonies is considered to be a resource and a wealthy person in his culture.

While recognizing the differences of students, storytelling can find ways to build community within a classroom and a school by encouraging reflection and identifying

commonalities. Wallace (2000) noted that, "The phenomenon of storytelling actually becomes a common language that facilitates meaningful communication; we can hear and understand each other's stories because we can usually recognize ourselves in the stories of others- no matter how varied our cultural backgrounds" (p. 436). Additional studies also support the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy. In a study conducted by Cliatt and Shaw (1988), the researchers reported that storytelling not only helped participants enhance the language and logic skills of the children but also resulted in the development of positive attitudes towards instruction. As a result, they concluded that the connection between literacy development in children and storytelling was well established.

#### *Storytelling and Reading*

Storytelling can be used as an effective means to increase early literacy and promote reading comprehension skills (Haven & Ducey, 2007). Through active engagement, storytelling as a pedagogical strategy can strengthen reading comprehension by helping students develop of a sense of story (Aiex, 1988; Craig, Hull, Haggart, & Crowder, 2001; Phillips, 1999). Having a sense of story is critical for students to make sense of text and derive meaning from a story. The impact of storytelling on the development of story through active engagement will be addressed below.

In storytelling, the interaction is personal, engaging, and immediate (Aiex, 1988). These characteristics allow storytelling to capture the attention of the audience. This enhances an understanding of the story by providing a social context for literacy. Students learn the social aspects of language through observation and participation in storytelling (Craig et al, 2001). Students have the ability to watch the storyteller use intonation and facial expressions to engage the audience (Aiex, 1988). When students retell stories, they have the opportunity to further develop their skills of comprehension by relating stories with expressions. Eder (2007) describes using the oral tradition of storytelling as a powerful strategy for setting patterns of meaning. She found that events which

tend to be most memorable and engaging are those associated with heightened emotion.

Through participation in storytelling experiences, students learn to build a sense of story by anticipating features of the genre, including how a story may begin and end (Craig et al, 2001; Washburn, 1983). The development of a sense of story allows students to make better predictions, to anticipate what is next, to increase awareness of cause and effect, sequence events, and develop other skills that aid comprehension (Aix, 1988). Storytelling further assists in the development of a sense of story by incorporating the use of essential story elements. These elements include point of view, plot, style, characters, setting, and theme (Haven & Ducey, 2007). Comprehension, critical listening, and thinking skills are also developed by combining storytelling with questioning, imagery, inferencing, and retelling (Craig et al., 2001; Washburn, 1983).

This development of a sense of story to increase comprehension is particularly critical to people of diverse cultures. Some cultures organize the way they relate events around topics rather than a main idea (Craig et al., 2001). Hence, for some cultures, stories are told as more of a chronicle of particular relationships that focus on the humor of the situation or sharing the feelings of another rather than as a sequence of events. The authors point out that these cultural patterns often result in children being referred for specialized services that may not stem from a disability but from their cultural experiences regarding the use of language. By participating in storytelling experiences that build a sense of story, these students are able to demonstrate increased success in reading comprehension.

Some researchers have focused on the practical application of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy to build reading comprehension. Sue Black (2008), storyteller-in-residence at Robert E. Clow Elementary School in Naperville, Illinois, offers some concrete examples of how to incorporate storytelling to improve comprehension. Black (2008) offers techniques for incorporating storytelling into the literature the students are

reading in the classroom. Students are asked to read at least five different stories and find one that they would like to tell. After reading the story, the student tries to tell the story to a partner. Following the retelling, students go back to the text to be sure that the important details are included. Students can also work with partners to retell the story using only six sentences – two each for the beginning, middle, and end. Following the six sentence version, students can try to tell the story using only three sentences - one sentence for the beginning, one for the middle, and one for the end. With a partner, the students share their stories. The listening partner offers positive feedback to the storyteller and then they are asked to offer one suggestion that might make the storytelling even better. The storytellers are then ready to begin telling their stories to the class. In her work, Black has witnessed a growing enthusiasm for storytelling as she helps students experiment to find just the right voice, facial expressions, and gestures to tell a story.

Storytelling, when modeled properly, can serve as an effective technique for developing literacy and reading comprehension skills. This is made possible through storytelling's ability to capture the attention of the students, thus enhancing the development of a sense of story in participants.

### *Storytelling and Writing*

Storytelling can be used in many different ways to impact student writing. NCTE (1992) states that, "The comfort of the oral tale can be the path by which students reach the written one." (p. 2). By first focusing on the telling of a story, students are not threatened by the written form, but can rely on orally conveying the importance of the story. Nicolini (1994) states that, "We are by nature storytellers; therefore, it only makes sense to allow students a chance to first do something at which they are already good." (p. 58). Engaging students in their learning and motivating them through the selection of stories they want to tell brings kids out of the shadows of instruction. Instead of passively receiving directions on how and what to write about, students make key decisions about their writing with the teacher as model, coach, and facilitator. This shift in power makes learning

inherently more meaningful for students because the stories belong to them (Nicolini, 1994).

In the writing classroom, storytelling is based on the telling of a narrative by the teacher or the student with the intention of eventually recording the story in written form. This pedagogical strategy easily links to a narrative form of writing, but can also help students with other types of writing. In the early grades, story writing is the focus of most instruction, but as students become more proficient writers, they are expected to master other forms such as persuasive and expository writing. Researchers have found that even into middle and high school, students can benefit from using storytelling to enhance narrative writing (Nicolini, 1994;Wallace, 2000;Houston,1997). Further, they discovered that students are able to transfer their skills in narrative writing to other more analytical forms.

There are two key areas that storytelling positively impacts to improve student writing: use of language and identification of audience. The use of language for writing addresses vocabulary and the organization of story. The audience is whom the writer is addressing and for what purpose. Both of these aspects of writing and how storytelling impacts them will be addressed below.

Finding the language to write can be a daunting task for child and adult alike (Nicolini, 1994). Many experience what has been called “writer’s block.” A mature writer will work through difficult points in writing, but many younger students give up and merely stop writing when they cannot think of anything to say. One benefit of using storytelling prior to writing is that students are given an opportunity to develop language about their story and get feedback from others before writer’s block can set in (Houston, Goolrick, & Tate,1991). In a response to why storytelling should be included in the classroom, NCTE (1992) states that, “Students who search their memories for details about an event as they are telling it orally will later find those details easier to capture in writing.” (p. 2). Orally sharing story ideas can help all students develop language for writing, including special education students, second language learners

and gifted students (Sasser & Zorena, 1991; McKamey, 1991; Houston et al., 1991).

As well as selecting language for their personal writing, students participating in storytelling are also exposed to new vocabulary that is used by the teacher or other students. Hearing new words or familiar words used in a new way in others’ stories can expand students working vocabulary (NCTE, 1992). Learning from each other also validates students’ voices and their life stories- helping to bridge cultural and economic divides within a classroom or school (Bustamante, 2002).

Storytelling prior to writing also serves to help students organize their story. This is typically considered the prewriting stage of the writing process. Frequently, teachers will have students create an outline or a web of the things the students want to include in their story. Often struggling writers, like struggling readers, do not have a strong sense of story and their prewriting is not very useful in crafting a well-designed plot (Phillips, 1999). Using storytelling to discuss many different types of stories, students can make decisions about what type of story they want to tell and what details they should include by participating in oral discussions with a partner or the class (Black, 2008). This allows the writer to get an idea about how their story should be structured before doing any writing. It also gives the student an opportunity to get feedback from the teacher or a peer during the prewriting stage. For a struggling writer, this time for oral storytelling gives them confidence in their ideas, motivation to craft an interesting story, and a starting point for written planning (Houston et al., 1991).

The second key area that is impacted by storytelling is an understanding of audience. Because students have spent time telling their story to their peers they have had a tangible experience with “audience.” Teaching young children how to think about their audience can be very challenging (NCTE, 1992). The writer’s audience is whomever they want to read their work, but this can seem like an abstract concept to a student who sees themselves as the audience. To compound the issue,

teachers often assign writing projects that are only read by the instructor for a grade. In these situations, the only motivating factor for the student is to write something that his or her teacher will like.

By allowing students to orally tell their story and then share the written form, students quickly have an understanding of their audience - the class. The students can then decide what style of language to use to appeal to the audience and the type of story being told. For instance, if a student wants to retell a sad, depressing story they would want the audience to feel those emotions after hearing or reading the story. In reverse, if a student wants to tell a humorous story they will need to make their audience laugh.

In addition to understanding how they want the audience to react, students also become more aware of the listener or reader's role in creating a story. NCTE (1992) states that, "Learners who regularly tell stories become aware of how an audience affects a telling, and they carry that awareness into their writing" (p. 2). As with reading, understanding is developed through the connection between the author and the reader. When writing students must learn that their role has changed, they now are the authors and they must find ways to engage with the reader. Students can practice this concept orally through storytelling until they have internalized how their reader might react as the story unfolds.

#### *Implications for Research and Practice*

In Jonathan Kozol's (2007) book, *Letters to a Young Teacher*, he writes that in the field of education today it is particularly difficult for teachers to protect a "sense of artistry and imaginative creativity" in their work, as both artistry and imagination are currently "under assault" in the field (p. 107). Kozol goes on to quote a statement made by Susan Neuman, the former Assistant for the United States Department of Education, who shared that it was the intention of the Bush Administration "to change the face of reading instruction across the United States from an art to a science" (Kozol, 2007, pg. 108). This focus has created the need for educators to emphasize the

quantitative outcomes of research based-strategies. This paper has shown that many researchers and educators have observed the effectiveness of using storytelling in the classroom, but because this strategy has its roots in the arts it is more easily measured in a qualitative fashion. Attempts to evaluate the complex processes of literacy instruction must include aesthetic knowledge to fully appreciate the benefits of this strategy. Kozol's thoughts also help highlight the disconnect that occurs when literature and language arts are taken out of the humanities and grouped in the sciences.

Educators will need to find methods for putting "art" back into teaching in order to reach all students. As many researchers are now recognizing storytelling as an effective strategy for increasing literacy, some have considered the needs of teachers in preparing to use this strategy by providing techniques for implementing storytelling into classroom practice. Mottley and Telfer (1996) conducted a study of prospective teachers to determine what their experiences with storytelling, both as listeners and as tellers, had been. They examined prospective teachers' knowledge of the impact of storytelling on literacy development and identified what needs prospective teachers have in order to be prepared to use this strategy with students. The researchers learned that the majority of the participants could recall experiences with storytelling, indicating that these experiences had a lasting impact on them. The prospective teachers were asked to consider their needs as they implemented this strategy in the classroom. Choosing appropriate stories, concern about their ability to effectively tell a story, and the need to understand the purpose of storytelling in education were found to be the greatest areas of need. These researchers asserted that storytelling should become a part of the strategies studied in teacher preparation programs so that teachers are prepared to implement storytelling with reading and writing instruction.

#### *Conclusion*

Storytelling is an effective strategy that incorporates the aesthetic ways of knowing into instruction. In addition to improving the academic performance of students in the areas of reading and

writing, storytelling also has the ability to enhance the arts in education and motivate children to connect with their learning. In pursuit of lifelong literacy, we must remember as Eisner (1985) stated that, "The enduring outcomes of education are found in...the joy of the ride, not merely arriving at the destination." (p. 35). We hope that Eisner's vision will be embraced as teachers find ways to implement storytelling in the classroom and researchers continue to study the benefits of this pedagogical strategy on reading and writing achievement.

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