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ABSTRACT

Although the value of reading to children has been well established, the merit of storytelling has only recently been recognized as a powerful means of developing language skills, self-concept, and self-esteem in children. Interactive, or participative storytelling, enables participants to tap into their creativity, enhance their powers of memory, develop their listening and language skills, and reduce their inhibitions about expressing ideas in public. A teacher at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington launched a 1-hour course designed to take small groups of college age storytellers out into the community to tell stories to preschoolers, kindergartners, and first graders. The course was originally conceived as a non-competitive analogue to the forensics program that students could repeat a maximum of eight times. In the early stages of the program, the participants relied heavily on contemporary stories and lesser known traditional tales. During the course of the year, the approach became more interactive: the student storytellers began to "let go" and "give over" the stories to their audiences as they relaxed and became more familiar with their stories and their audiences. Many more activities specifically geared to at-risk children are being included in later stages of the program. Participatory storytelling, especially when involving personal narrative, is beneficial to all children, whether they are at-risk or not. (Contains 22 references.) (RS)

Telling With, Not Telling To: Interactive Storytelling and At-Risk Children

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TELLING WITH, NOT TELLING TO: INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING AND AT-RISK CHILDREN

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The power and value of reading to children are indisputable (Trealease, 1985; Hall, 1992; Snow, 1992). Besides the great joy it offers both parent and child, reading to children in their early years introduces them to story structures and prepares them to become early independent readers. Nationwide reading incentive programs, which target both normal and at-risk children such as "Book It" and "Mommy, Read to Me," are proliferating. Although the value of *reading* to children has been well established, the merit of *storytelling* is only recently being recognized as a powerful means of developing language skills, self-concept, and self-esteem in children.

ESSENTIAL VALUE OF STORYTELLING

Fisher (1989) argues that storytelling is *inherent* to the human condition. Others have also suggested that the label *homo narrans* (narrating man) more accurately describes humans than *homo sapien* (knowing man) (see Colson Unpublished document). Humans, thus, understand and communicate life experiences "as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends" (Fisher, 1989). As such, communication can be viewed as a kind of "storying" of our lives (Livo and Rietz, 1986).

Storying is so basic to our lives that the world is actually reflected back to us through the stories we create. In a sense each story becomes a mirror of our daily existence, reflecting our experiences back to us as more significant and profound than we might view them. "Story takes the ordinary and binds it into all of human existence, revealing the significance of the trivial" (Livo and Rietz, 1986). Precisely because they reinforce the significance of daily activities, stories enable children to become male and female heroes of the world (Black, 1990).

Increasingly, scholars and lay people have recognized this pivotal role that narrative plays in empowering human beings (Paley, 1990; Brunner, 1986; Hardy, 1977; Wells, 1986; Verriour, 1990; Gersie, 1990) to better "synthesize and verbalize personal experiences, communicate feelings, and construct meaning" (Verriour, 1990). Moreover, storytelling is increasingly being used as a viable part of therapy, since stories "offer . . . a safe way to clarify our . . . responses and other people's reactions" (Gersie, 1990). Whether emanating from the rich tapestry of traditional folklore or from newly created personal narratives, stories deeply touch and move human beings because they resonate with our own life experience. In a sense, every story connects listeners with significant cultural myths as well as "told and untold life events" (Gersie, 1990).

VALUE OF INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING WITH CHILDREN

Interactive, or participatory storytelling, enables participants to tap into their creativity, enhance their powers of memory, develop their listening and language skills, and reduce their inhibitions about expressing ideas in public. In addition to developing a child's vocabulary, concentration, and ability to think symbolically, Maguire (1985) believes storytelling helps children recognize patterns in language and in human experience. It also provides children with problem-solving exercises, strengthens their capacity to form rational evaluations, assists their cooperative interpersonal behavior, and introduces them to the symbols and traditions that define the culture with whom they share the world (Maguire, 1985). Storytelling can also offer children a means of expressing feelings that they have difficulty verbalizing and provides them with the tools to empathize with people from different races, backgrounds and cultures (George-

Warren, 1992). In short, stories serves our children in many ways.

Interactive storytelling offers an overt means of bringing children into the act of creation. I have discussed elsewhere the value of making performance interactive and participatory for children (Tallant and Trimble, 1992). No where do I find the interactive approach more beneficial than when working with children, particularly children who have been identified as at-risk. This approach works well in school settings, where at-risk children spend much of their time mainstreamed in regular classes. I have found participatory storytelling works extremely well when small-to-moderate numbers of children (twenty to twenty-eight) are targeted . Moreover, my field research suggests that having my college age students perform for and listen to the stories children tell greatly enhances my students' own learning and development.

Because I believe so strongly in the value of storytelling, a little over a year ago I launched a one hour course at University of North Carolina at Wilmington designed to take small groups of college age storytellers out into the community to tell stories to pre-schoolers, kindergartners, and first graders. My objectives at the time were rather limited: I wanted to provide my students with a forum in which they could apply the theoretical concepts they had learned in the classroom. I also wanted to spread a bit of goodwill between the university and community. Lastly, I wanted to set up a base of children that I could track over the next five years to see if any long-term effects of interactive storytelling on young children could be demonstrated. While I did not originally set out to target at-risk children, I have subsequently become more interested in how they are affected in such a program. Little did I realize how naive I was about the practical benefits of storytelling. All in all, the course exceeded every goal and expectation I originally had. The remainder of this paper will describe the course as I originally structured and taught it, discuss my changes to the course, and briefly suggest directions for future research.

THE ORIGINAL COURSE

COM 175 was originally conceived as a non-competitive analogue to our forensics program that students could repeat a maximum of eight times. The first semester I offered the course, I recruited five talented, highly motivated students. The second semester, two additional students joined the program. At the beginning of each semester, after students selected stories they wanted to perform, I coached them individually and in groups. Next we began visiting classrooms. Each student became proficient at telling three or four different stories and did approximately thirty performances during the course of the year. The audiences were comprised of ten different groups of children with approximately twenty-two to thirty children in each audience. Children identified as at risk made up approximately one half of each audience. Typically, we revisited each audience two to five times.

In the early stages of the program, we relied heavily on contemporary stories and lesser known nontraditional tales. For example several students told stories from ***Fairy Tales*** (1981), by Terry Jones (a former member of Monty Python). Later during the year, at the suggestion of the children and their teachers, we added more traditional favorites and ethnic tales. By the end of the year we began creating, with the children, original stories.

During the course of the year, our approach became more interactive. After working closely with the children, my students saw how important it was to actually include them into the tellings. Whereas my students initially maintained a somewhat rigid control over every aspect of the telling, they began to "let go" and "give over" the stories to their audiences as they relaxed and became more familiar with their stories and audiences (as Livo and Rietz (1986) encourage all tellers to do).

My students encouraged participation in many different ways, and I was amazed at their inventiveness. Initially they asked children to supply sound effects, names of

characters, or dialogue. One particularly talented student sometimes feigned forgetfulness in order to elicit help from the children. Later the tellers actually brought children up to the performance area and encouraged them to act out actions or characters. Even though they were often constrained to rather cramped spaces, my students became quite adept at arranging their audiences in ways that encouraged audience participation. For instance, many students opted to get down on the floor with the children so they would be in close physical contact and could pull individual children into the action of the story. For example, one student told the traditional tale "Close the Door" in which a husband and wife stubbornly refuse to shut their front door. My student actually brought a fourth grade boy and girl up to the performance area and told the story as they spoke the characters' dialogue and did some of the actions. The children were delighted at their direct involvement. Toward the end of the year my tellers had developed so much confidence that they were able to create beginnings of stories and invite the children to take turns completing the tales. It was during these sessions that I saw the children, particularly the at-risk children, blossom.

In these interactive sessions, the children's faces and voices often reflected intense concentration as they waited to tell. Depending upon the instructions of the individual storyteller, the children either raised their hands or simply burst forth with an important plot line or character description. Most spoke their parts with conviction, creativity, and elan. Their use of language reflected conscious attempts to use vivid language and correct grammar. Invariably, every child professed a preference for the participatory stories. As I observed them I understood why. First, the stories truly became *theirs*. Instead of passively watching and listening, they were able to shape the stories to their liking. Most importantly, though, these stories became vehicles for the children to tell their own life stories. For example, I told a fragment of a story which concerned the Easter Bunny's attempts to elicit help in delivering Easter baskets when he developed a bad head cold. Although I had in mind how the story might develop, I was unprepared for the kinds of personalized responses I got. Children made themselves the Easter bunny's helpers and told about how they used their skateboards and bicycles to help deliver Easter goodies. They explained that they called their best friends to join them and delivered specific kinds of candy to particular individuals. One child spoke of the white chocolate that he helped deliver to a classmate (the classmate's favorite kind). Other children told how their brothers and sisters were given mere *hollow* candy eggs, unlike the *solid* chocolate bunnies they received. During the course of our eighteen minute story, the children's contributions revealed much to me about their hopes, fears, and concerns, much the way more formalized personal narratives do. My students and I ended the year with the realization that we needed to take advantage of this participatory storytelling style, *especially* the personal narrative approach.

CURRENT COURSE

This year I am working with seven students, three of whom returned from previous semesters. My students and I plan to work with many of the same audiences and, in cooperation with their teachers, track their progress as readers and students. We have been approached by a number of groups who want us to work exclusively with at-risk children. We have also been asked to work with dysfunctional children of all age ranges. At this point I don't have enough students to accommodate all the requests, but over the next several years I hope to expand and refine the parameters of the program.

In planning this year's agenda, I have included many more activities specifically geared to at-risk children. At the suggestion of Donald Davis (1992), I am in the process of teaching my students how to help children develop their own personal stories. My students and I take the children through a series of exercises designed to help them recognize their own "story-worthiness" and develop their descriptive abilities.

We ask the children to describe mental pictures of familiar things such as their rooms in the summertime, especially in terms of how they smell and look. As their inhibitions diminish and their creativity increases, we present them with more and more challenging tasks such as asking them to describe their houses on Halloween if they had means to decorate it any way they liked (Davis, 1992). After such "warm up" exercises, we help them identify kernels of stories from their daily experiences and assist them in creating complete stories.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

What does this all mean? At this point I have only impressions and hypotheses. I have uncovered some disconcerting evidence that perhaps parents, and not children, may determine the success or failure of at-risk students. Children's librarian Ellen Munds (Unpublished Study, 1992) is heading up a long term study on at-risk children. Her preliminary findings suggest that until the age of ten nearly all children are eager to accept any kind of reading/storytelling experience. After the age of ten, however, their desire to read falls off sharply. If parents don't read, children don't either. Munds's study strongly suggests that perhaps we need to develop more programs that target parents as well as children. Clearly, more studies are needed in this area.

My own experiences, though certainly less global, suggest that participatory storytelling, especially when involving personal narrative, is beneficial to all children, whether they are at-risk or not. By making storytelling an active, participatory event, we can help children develop confidence in their emergent narrative ability. By encouraging them to take creative risks, they can learn what a story is from the inside out by making storying their own. And as they retell their personal stories, they can make better sense out of their lives.

Endnotes

[1]Bettlehiem's landmark study, ***The Uses of Enchantment***, limits its discussion the importance of stories to the emotional well-being of children.

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