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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of storytelling in educational venues. Specifically, the paper compares data and findings from four ethnographic, qualitative, arts-based studies that examined either students' or teachers' reactions to oral narration in classroom settings. It suggests that, through stories and storytelling, people are exposed to long-standing archetypal models that engage the imagination, stimulate sympathetic responses, and cause participants to think more deeply about their social world. Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that the activity of storytelling has an impact on participants' interpersonal relationships, empathy, and sense of "connectedness" in the classroom. Therefore, telling stories aloud (without the aid of books, multimedia presentations, or other devices) needs to have primacy in classrooms. (Contains 2 figures and 21 references.) (Author/BT)

Building Bridges: How Storytelling Influences Teacher/Student Relationships

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of storytelling in educational venues. Specifically, it compares data and findings from four ethnographic, qualitative, arts-based studies that examined either students' or teachers' reactions to oral narration in classroom settings. This paper suggests that, through stories and storytelling, we are exposed to long-standing archetypal models that engage the imagination, stimulate sympathetic responses and cause participants to think more deeply about their social world. Therefore, telling stories aloud, (without the aid of books, multimedia presentations, or other devices), needs to have primacy in classrooms.

Building Bridges: How Oral Narration Influences Teacher/Student Relationships

Robin Mello, Ph.D.

Storytelling today is no longer a dying art form found solely in the folk traditions. Instead, it is experiencing a neorenaissance of sorts and, as storytelling has grown in popularity, the evolution of a class of experts, performance artists, (I include myself in this category), and professional tellers has also emerged. Often these individuals are viewed as the authorities on storytelling so that instead of perpetuating and advocating storytelling in our communities, we have created an impression that telling requires highly specialized skill. This professionalization also implies that there are right vs. wrong ways to tell along with expert vs. novice tellers. In addition, when we define the storyteller as a specialist we often place that individual outside his or her community (or classroom) thereby creating a paradigm that invites people to think of themselves as either knowers or nonknowers--professionals or amateurs--and this belief system can have a silencing effect on many who may be interested in exploring their storied voice.

Perhaps, because of this tendency to professionalize the art, teachers as well as their students do not automatically view themselves as able tellers. Or, it could be that the nature of public school instruction itself adds to the lack of confidence. Teaching can often be an isolating and restrictive experience. Whatever the cause, I am always amazed at how many experienced teachers I encounter in storytelling classes who report that they could "never get up in front of the class and tell a story," or would "rather read a book out loud than tell a story."

At the beginning of my college-level storytelling courses, (where a majority of participants are, or soon will be, teachers), students often report that they are "not really able to tell a story without memorizing it," "not able to tell like a professional," or have "no creativity and no ability." While we quickly belie these remarks through sharing and exploring stories, their embedded attitudes fly in the face of what is known about basic human nature and ability.

We are, if nothing else, a creative, linguistically rich, and varied species that strives to make meaning through language and narrative. Storytelling is our oldest literacy. Therefore, to assume that storytelling is not an attainable skill, is to create a false assumption about this native and natural process

> At first, I will admit that, although I am a fairly outgoing person, I was nervous about this [storytelling] class. I was unsure as to what the expectations would be, and I had thought, how is she going to make me into a storyteller? What I didn't realize is that the potential is in all of us; we all have had experiences with storytelling in one way or another...And now I realize that perhaps this won't be as difficult to introduce in my teaching as I had once thought. (Teacher Participant)

Storytelling in Classrooms

So why is it that despite the known value of storytelling in classrooms, it is still a vastly underutilized method? For example, too often in schools teachers bring in tapes, videos, and artists to tell stories to their students--instead of telling stories themselves! While we know that there are great benefits to enrichment programs, data also indicate that these programs do not (usually) have as long-term an effect on student learning, as does a classroom teacher's daily influence.

In 1986 Gordon Wells' seminal study investigating the links between storytelling and school success was published. In it he reported key findings which suggest that an essential element for literacy development is consistent exposure to storytelling in both the home and classroom environments. Several current studies support Wells' hypotheses, these examine the activity of storytelling, showing it to be an integral part of teaching in classrooms (see Table 1).

Overall, findings from these studies suggest that storytelling is useful in teaching content knowledge. The literature demonstrates that the storytelling process assist listeners and tellers as they gain an understanding of language, culture, comprehension, humor, and logical thinking skills. Findings also show that telling stories, reviewing life events, reacting verbally to texts, hearing narratives, and participating in classroom discussions function, for students and teachers, as tools for growth and learning. In general, the literature supports the following broad conclusions:

1) Storytelling is a constructed experience that involves both listener and teller in a highly interactive and creative process. Stories told by children contain worldviews and storytelling assists children in theory building and language fluency.

2) Oral literacy has social, emotional and intellectual functions, ones that assist children in cognitive and psychosocial development.

3) Storytelling by children to adults enhances writing ability.

4) Sustained exposure to storytelling contributes to language learning.

5) Storytelling is an important teaching methodology for teachers, especially in reading and literacy-based programs.

Figure 1

Research Studies on the Effect of Storytelling in Classroom Instruction

Researcher	Date	Subjects	Method	Findings
Baumgartner	1996	20 3rd grade students	Researcher told stories to students and reactions were elicited.	Storytelling is an effective teaching method.
Farrell & Nessel	1995	26 1st grade students	Stories were told by teachers, students' retellings and responses measured for fluency.	Storytelling enhanced fluency, vocabulary acquisition and recall.
Gallas	1994	20 1st & 2nd grade students	Teacher/researcher told and elicited stories from students.	Students tell stories in order to explore content and develop self-image.
Gerbracht	1994	94 3rd grade students	Teachers and students were audio taped telling stories. Taped performances and writing were analyzed.	Storytelling is an effective method for enhancing writing ability.
Mello	2000	20 4th grade students	Researcher told stories, student writing was elicited as both pre and post intervention.	Writing was more complex and involved after storytelling sessions occurred.
Mello	1997	10 special education students	Researcher told stories to students, responses were elicited.	Listeners create imaginary images when listening.
Nelson	1990	52 4th grade students	Parts of stories were told to students' written and verbal responses were elicited.	Listeners create varied and diverse images in response to story imagery.
Rosman	1992	60 1st & 2nd grade students	Stories were told to children and their responses were recorded for study and analysis.	Storytelling is an educational event that enhances self-awareness, imagination, and cultural knowledge.

Study 1: "Creating Pictures in my Mind"

In 1996 I conducted a qualitative study that was designed to look at disabled children's responses to storytelling in the classroom environment. What, I wondered, might students say about their reactions to stories when they were told aloud? I also wanted to explore their opinions of storytelling vs. watching television, hearing texts read aloud, reading, or listening to music.

Participants in this study were a group of nine, ten, and eleven year-old special education students who had been assigned to be part of the same reading group. These students were from white middle-class families and were attending an urban elementary school in a medium-sized city located on the East Coast of the U.S.A. Their reading teacher, an educator with twenty years experience, consistently extended and enriched her curriculum by providing students with multiple opportunities to interact with literature in a variety of formats including reading aloud, computer software, and through video versions of literary texts. However, until this study took place, she had never told a story to her students.

Every other week for three months I worked with the study's participants using arts-based and qualitative protocols. This included telling stories from multicultural sources, conducting group discussions, and encouraging students to tell me stories they created. These research sessions often lasted over an hour and a half; most of the time I had to struggle to end them because the students didn't want to stop. This impressed the participating teacher because, as she observed, "the students have a really short attention span."

Findings from this study show that students reacted to the storytelling discourse because it was a powerful and creative experience, one that they perceived as active, inclusive, and fun. They felt that as listeners they had control over the story's details--as much control in fact as the teller does. Conversations about stories were full of comments such as "I saw," "I went," "I felt," "I acted," or "I pictured it in my mind." Theresa' s (one of the student informants), comment exemplifies this type of response: "You said there was a mountain and...I put a mountain in my mind. I just kind of stuck it in my mind and saw it actually there." Susan, another participant, felt (as most of the other students did), that storytelling and story-listening created a need to "think differently" and to "imagine and act things out in your mind."

Data show that, in addition to the power and creativity that storytelling engendered, students were also aware of participating in an action of cocreation and meaning making. Students observed that "listening to a story is making the pictures in my head," or "storytelling is making something come to life inside." These children perceived the role of listener as powerful and active. They were consumers, who could, though visualizing the action, control the storyteller's text. In addition, they were linked to the teller because "both the teller and the listener go through the story together." For example, Jack, a participant, observed that "the teller might make the story but it's the kid who sees the pictures and remembers it later."

Findings suggest that tellers and listeners, as well as teachers and students, connect to each other through the storytelling process by creating a shared world that is visualized as well as heard.

> When you started to tell that story then I pretended that I was the girl, it was me [you were talking about]. I had the same problem... I was having a hard time too. (Student participant)

> It's like you (the teller) are giving us a blank book inside our heads with no words in it with just pictures and you are the tape and you just tell us and we have to flip the book to see the pictures in our mind.
> (Student participant)

For these participants storytelling and story listening were powerful interactive experiences, ones that involved them in partnership with the teller and each other. Finally, data suggest that educators need to take another look at the art of telling, understanding that sharing stories with students on a regular basis is a participatory, interactive, and creative exercise.

Study 2: The "Cinderella Meets Ulysses" Project

In 1998 the "Cinderella Meets Ulysses" project was conducted in order to further examine the effects of storytelling on students' perceptions and learning. Students involved in this study were all regular attendees of Washington Intermediate School, a neighborhood facility located in a small New England mill town. All were between the ages ten through twelve, of working class, working poor, or welfare poor parents of white and mixed-race backgrounds.

Data collection, which took place over the course of one school year, focused on students' reactions to storytelling presentations. Texts were selected from a wide variety of world tales from multicultural sources and included myths, folk and fairy tales, sections of epics, legends, and fables. In addition, stories were also selected for both conformist and nonconformist heroes and heroines, as well characters who portrayed vanity, foolishness, courage, housekeeping, magical abilities, care taking, and superhuman abilities.

When students were asked what they thought about the experience of storytelling, all had positive responses. They liked the storytelling sessions because of their entertainment value ("it was fun"). Storytelling also helped to make information "interesting in school." Students also felt that without the activity of telling, along with the interest and drama it evoked, the story content would have less value. The subsequent meaning they gleaned from the roles, motifs, and archetypes of stories had more impact when told orally (as opposed to presenting stories by reading them aloud).

The most powerful part of the storytelling experience, however, was the relationship that developed between the teller and listener. Storytelling, students noted created relationships between students and text, plot and life experience, as well as the audience and the teller. Missy, an informant in the study, described this relationship as being "an ambassador." She observed that when stories were told aloud the teller was

behaving like an ambassador because s/he was bringing stories from other cultures and other places to the school. In addition, a storyteller is like an ambassador because the teller is a bridge builder, a person who broadens the discourse by describing images and messages from other worlds. A teller, like an ambassador, also creates détente.

Data indicate that the combination of storytelling along with postperformance discussions and other arts process, such as drawing and writing stories, enhanced students' ability to clarify and examine their values. It is posited that this was due to the fact that through telling students were provided with multiple perspectives of both events and characters. The data show that students reacted deeply and profoundly to this range of viewpoints by expanding their own perceptions and attitudes. Students also interacted with each other on a more personable and equitable level, probably due to the fact that they were encouraged to think, tell, and listen to the perspectives of their peers

Study 3: Developing Teachers' Voices

Over the past seven years I have had the good fortune to be able to promote storytelling for teachers and other education professionals by creating and teaching courses about storytelling, at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, Creative-Arts-in-Learning Program at Lesley University, and with the Experimental College at Tufts University. During the final week of each course students are given an optional assignment. They are asked to submit an essay reflecting on their learning experience. These mini-essays are used to reflect on some of the dilemmas discussed above, to see if teacher/participants have gained any benefit from the course, and to examine individual students' development of voice and self-expression.

Each written statement (N=88) was coded for recurring themes, words, and phrases. These codes were categorized and connections between codes were examined for representative trends and themes. In addition, the writings from disparate student groups attending different classes were compared. Finally, individual transcripts were reread, with emerging theories in mind, and examined for any divergent, alternative, or negative data.

Data from this study show that 70% of the teachers reported that storytelling helped them develop their concept of the teaching profession. 49% observed that it helped them implement their curriculum in new, creative, and/or exciting ways, while 20% felt that telling stories in their classrooms increased their connection and relationship with their students.

> I've come to realize that the key issue for all teachers is getting past the reading of a story and into the telling of a story. I understand the difference, especially in the impact telling makes... the challenge is to put away the books and notes and know the material. (Teacher Participant)

Due to the interactive nature of the course, an overwhelming majority of participants reported that they had fun learning to tell stories. They enjoyed the processes and experiences they participated in during class meetings and found that when they

replicated these narrative and discourse practices with their own students', the lessons were successful.

> I feel that this class has been very beneficial to me as a teacher. In the past, I had always been afraid to tell a story without the use of a script. Now I have learned that it is important to tell my students stories. I am excited about telling stories in my classroom. (Teacher Participant)

For almost a quarter of the teachers, the experience of learning to tell stories was even more profound. One student, for example, observed that "this was a process that was nourishing to my soul," another commented that the process of learning to tell a story was "an epiphany."

> [It] has been an epiphany...through this process of learning to tell stories I have become transported through imagination and emotion to where my own story is... and this was my epiphany, that there is freedom in the oral tradition that releases the teller from the constraints of structure that are inherent in the written word. (Teacher Participant)

Like participants in studies discussed previously, these educators found that storytelling was powerful because the act of telling connected them with their students and colleagues. In addition, storytelling was "transformative," for some, because it gave them new perspectives regarding their own voice, creativity, and communication skills. The activity of telling seemed, once again, to "build bridges" between teachers and students by opening the lines of communication in the classroom and by supporting self-esteem. These insights are in keeping with findings from the other studies discussed here, (as Kimberly from study #1 observed, the storytelling teacher is the diplomat of the classroom and an emissary for the curriculum).

> I am amazed at the power of storytelling! I have a new and exciting way to reach my students. I told them a story the other day and they were spellbound--that was on Friday afternoon when you almost have to stand on your head just to get them to be quiet! I'm amazed at the power and depth of the storytelling experience. I also have made lots of connections to people like the librarian and other teachers! (Teacher Participant)

Figure 2

Codes and Categories in Students' Reflective Essays

Coded Content	%/Frequency (N=88)
Comments regarding joy, fun, and enthusiasm	97%
Storytelling has helped me examine my role as teacher in new and productive ways.	70%
The experience immersed me in a creative process	71%
I am a unique person with a unique way of telling/I have found my voice	59%
This class helped me establish and/or reconnect with my roots, history, and community	57%
Storytelling has been therapeutic for me	52%
I've got new ideas on how to relate stories to my curriculum	49%
Storytelling increased my sense of empowerment	33%
I have found a new passion!	33%
It's made me better at thinking on my feet	22%
Storytelling helped me connect to my students in new ways	20%
Storytelling made me change my understanding of others - in a more positive way.	17%
Storytelling helped me get over a fear of talking to groups of people.	17%
I no longer look at storytelling as a waste of time in my classroom. Now I encourage it.	14%
The class gave me new perspectives and information on the role of language and narrative in my life	11%

Study 4: "Passing the Torch"

During the 1999-2000 academic year, I conducted a study that examined the effectiveness of personal narratives on student learning. This investigation was implemented in the initial field-study course for undergraduates; a course entitled *Observation and Participation in Urban Schools* (O&P). O&P is offered to students who have declared education as a major but have not yet been admitted into a professional education program.

In order to encourage students in their professional identity development, I needed to find methods that, over time, might encourage them to acquire inclusive and realistic attitudes toward classroom teaching, ones that would be supportive of their learning over time. I choose to work on establishing a climate of thoughtfulness about the nature of teaching by sharing a variety of life-narratives and teaching stories. Subsequently, I developed and performed eight "teaching tales," all drawn from my own personal experiences. These were drawn from out of a wide range of venues such as prisons, charter schools, public schools, special education programs, and hospitals. I assumed that, by sharing these stories, students would be better able to adjust and examine their perceptions of their future professional role. The effectiveness of this approach was investigated through interviews, discussions, advising sessions, and surveys.

Findings from this study show that the dominant response students had to storytelling pedagogy were to tell their own stories in response. Rebecca, (a sophomore), for example, told one of these stories:

> One morning in the third-grade the teacher was having the kids tell what they were going to do over the weekend. When one of the girls was explaining what she was going to do, one of the boys was digging in his desk. The teacher stopped the girl's explanation and scolded the boy for not paying attention. She said he was being rude to the girl and missing out on what she was talking about. He just looked at the teacher and told her he had heard everything. He then went into a long explanation of exactly what the girl was going to be doing that weekend. Everyone started laughing hysterically as he just kept going, including the teacher. When he was done, he just casually said: "See, I was listening." When the teacher finally stopped laughing she apologized for thinking he hadn't been listening and asked him to stop digging in his desk.

The act of sharing this 'teaching tale' gave Rebecca an opportunity, along with her audience, to reflect more thoughtfully and empathetically on the role of teachers and students in classrooms.

These student-teachers, like the teachers described in Study #3, felt that the stories they heard helped them learn "valuable lessons" and gain "perspectives" about teaching.

> I read these stories and gain another perspective about testing your own ideas and their validity for teaching. They are some of the most interesting reading we have in college. (Student-Teacher Participant)

Participants, like those in previous studies, felt that stories helped them empathize and build relationships with their cooperating teachers, cohort members, and the college instructor.

> Her stories make it really easy to identify with her because it makes me realize that, hey, even though she is a professor she was once in the same position as we are now [student teachers]. These were lessons in sharing fears, which makes me feel less inferior. It makes me think, hey, this could happen to me and that makes me feel that I can teach.
>
> (Student/Teacher Participant)

The connections derived from the storytelling experience gave students an opportunity to explore their perceptions of the teacher/student relationship. The outcome of the experiment was that students felt safer-- supported by their professor. The also felt more prepared to face the challenge of real classrooms full of real students.

Conclusion

Findings indicate that stories are learning tools that, when used by educators, provide links to content, experience, and the world of school. Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that the activity of storytelling has an impact on participants' interpersonal relationships, empathy, and sense of 'connectedness' in the classroom. There are data to suggest that storytelling is an educative process, one which benefits the listener as well as the teller, and further, that the telling of traditional texts in classrooms enriches both the lives of students as well as the teachers. Finally, findings from all four studies indicate that storytelling-teachers demonstrate a model of best practice.

We need to take a renewed look at the way we portray and advocate the craft of telling so that students and teachers are encouraged to become consistently and actively involved. Those of us in the education field need to become storytellers because, when storytelling occurs, interpersonal collaborations, learning relationships, and connections are created. In learning environments, such as classrooms, stories should be told consistently and often.

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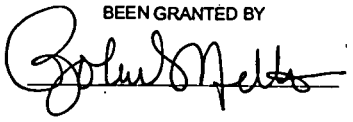

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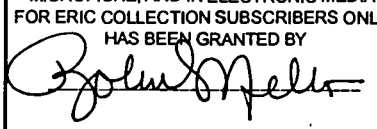

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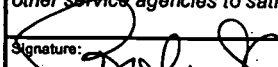
Signature: 

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