

STORYTELLING IN THE CLASSROOM

a practical guide for storytellers and teachers

(primary and secondary)

by Jackie Kerin & Susan Pepper.

Language helps us make sense of the world. Humans don't learn to talk unless they are spoken to. Through language we make connections, build concepts, talk our way into understanding. Practising talking develops vocabulary, confidence and ultimately our ability to solve problems. Being able to express ourselves clearly means we have the option of expressing difficult emotions such as frustration or anger verbally.

There are many ways of developing a strong oral culture in the classroom using stories.

Storytelling is an art form through which the storyteller projects mental and emotional images to an audience using the spoken word, including sign languages and gestures, carefully matching story content with audience needs and environment. The story sources reflect all literatures and cultures, fiction and non-fiction, for educational, recreational, historic, folkloric, entertainment and therapeutic purposes.

The National Storytelling Association (USA)

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1. WHY NOT SIMPLY READ STORIES?

Reading stories is good; telling stories is different.

When reading a story to a class, your gaze is on the text. The language is “bookish”, that is, it is literary. Whatever you are reading will have its own “voice” – the style, tone and language patterns chosen by the author. Too many interruptions, asking for responses, breaks into the story disrupting the author’s pacing.

When storytelling, your eyes are looking into the eyes of your listeners; the language is oral; the voice is yours. The way you speak, the language patterns, pace and tone are yours. If you think the plot could get a move, on you can quicken things along. If your listeners are gripped by the tension of the tale you can stretch it out. It’s easier to step in and out of the story – oral story telling can be as interactive as you make it.

When telling a story you are modelling a unique way of using language to which many of your students may not have been exposed. You are putting away the books. For some the daily confrontation of the written word is wearing – that constant assessment of what is on the page.

Working with stories is a great way of fostering the fourth R in the curriculum – RELATIONSHIP.

2. HOW YOU CAN USE STORIES IN THE CLASSROOM

The possibilities are endless but here are some thoughts.

Values

From an early age we respond to the metaphors contained in stories. Even prep grades can discuss the values and ideas expressed in a simple tale. Bullying, tolerance, compliance, cooperation, strength, courage – the list is endless. It's easier for everyone to discuss uncomfortable behaviours in the context of a story. The externalising of issues can mean a less emotive and more thoughtful discussion can be had. Animal fables are useful here but be wary of the moral. Once you tell the children the moral, the options of interpretation are gone. It is essential when using stories in this way that you explore the tale with the students with an open mind to their perceptions. They will possibly surprise you with their interpretations. Subtle parables will appeal to older minds.

Two monks were walking back to their monastery when they came to a ford at a stream. At the ford a pretty farmer's daughter asked them to help her to cross the stream as she did not want to get mud on her new dress. The first monk ignored her and continued on his way remembering the strict rules of their order not even to look at women. Without speaking the second picked her up in his arms and carried her across the stream. He let her down on the other side and continued walking with the other monk. The first monk began to chastise him, asking him if he had forgotten the strict rules of their order. He kept referring to the incident all the way back to the monastery. As they reached the gateway of the monastery he referred to the matter again. The second monk turned to him and said, "Are you still carrying the woman with you? I left her at the stream."

Pebbles on the Road, a collection of Zen stories. Stephen Cassettari

Language enrichment

Stories are another way of soaking a classroom in language. Words are essential in building thought connections in the brain, the more language a child experiences – the better access they will have to complex concepts. When you are telling stories you can "up" the language. Students can understand things said which they may not be able to read. Comprehension is in front of expression. With young listeners, try using several adjectives when one would do – "it was a huge, gigantic, enormous pumpkin." Talk about "scavenging seagulls", "the industrious little rabbit." Explore simile – "sank like a stone", "fought like a tiger." Allow young children to interact with the story. Pretend you are stuck for words and let them help you out of a sticky moment.

Stories as a means of integrating subjects.

Stories can be used to introduce new areas of study in natural science. Looking at spiders, what better way to start than with the ancient story of Arachne who boasted that she could weave better patterns than the goddess Athene. When Athene saw the complexity and beauty of Arachne's work she was jealous and turned her into a spider. From that moment Arachne and her descendants have woven beautiful webs. Or Anansi, an Afro Caribbean trickster who also happens to be a spider.

There are many anthologies of indigenous tales of nature containing creation stories, stories of fire and volcanoes, floods and river systems and many stories that relate to the stars, the sun and the moon.

Stories and concepts

There is clarity in a well-told story. Without the complexity of the written word, which requires deciphering and interpreting, concepts can open up. Here is an edited version of a story I first heard David Attenborough tell on the radio - a master storyteller - and how much better it was to hear him tell it, than read it.

In 1982, an ancient settlement was being excavated in Japan. It was estimated to be about 2000 years old. The people who lived there were farmers and stored their harvest in small pits. One was excavated which still contained at the bottom some blackened, dead grains of rice. But among them lay one seed that was different from all the others. It was taken, planted and watered – and it sprang into life. Eleven years later it produced its first flower bud. It was a magnolia. (At this point I like to produce some magnolia flowers.) This is a sleeping beauty story if ever there was one. It is also a marvellous demonstration that plants, in the form of seeds, are not only unexcelled travellers in space, but also incomparable travellers in time.

The Private Life of Plants. David Attenborough

Historical and cultural context

Storytelling can help provide historical and cultural context for a work of art, for dinosaur bones, or for an historic object. There is evidence to suggest that a child's ability to listen and follow a sequential pattern of events is enhanced when the information is wrapped in story.

Stories and Literature

Students who have a grounding in the old folk stories, who have practised talking about meanings, stereotypes, archetypes, metaphor, structure and genre, have a solid background for literature studies at the secondary level. Familiarity with the old tales leads to links with Shakespeare, Ancient Greek literature and biblical literature. Links can also be made with contemporary popular culture – super heroes, romance and the way archaic stereotypes still populate our screens and other texts. Here's a story that illustrates a literary definition:

TRUTH AND PARABLE

Here is a story about Parable, who was one of twins, his brother being Truth. When young they looked alike but as they grew they became less alike and went different ways. Parable was the better observer of men and women and more amenable to change. Truth, when young, went always naked and people did not mind. To see a little naked Truth did no one any great harm. But when Truth grew up and became man-size and still went naked, his life was hard and people kept away from him. They were shocked and frightened by naked Truth and would not have him in their homes and protected their children from him. And thus it was. One day Parable came along ...from head to foot he was joy to behold. Of many colours were his clothes and his

hat was finest silk. His shoes were of the softest leather and he approached without noise. "What is this brother?" he said "so sad, so long faced, naked and cold."

Truth told him truthfully, of his sad life. "Everybody avoids me," he said. "I have no place anywhere. I am old and finished."

"Rubbish?" replied Parable. "We are the same age. And I am welcome everywhere. People don't mind me one bit. You see, brother, people are funny. They don't like things naked and straightforward. They like things fancied up a bit and a bit fake, like me. Come. We are still the same size, we are twins. I will give you some of my finery. I've got lots, and it will change your life,"

And it did. Soon the twins were inseparable. You could hardly tell them apart. And Truth, dressed like Parable, was welcome everywhere.

A Small Town is a World, David Kossoff

3. STORIES

OLD STORIES

There are thousands of stories circling the world and many of them are thousands of years old. They have been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth; carried in peoples' memories and in their hearts. These stories are like the round stones in the river, they have been polished by thousands of retellings.

GENRES AND TYPES

Definitions of story genres and types are merely a guide. It is necessary to remain open minded as some stories will seem to be a bit of this and that. Definitions can change when words are used in contexts eg. Myth: ancient story with supernatural beings containing religious meaning. Myth: fictitious belief.

But categorising stories makes it easier to talk about them and to locate them.

FABLE ... a very short story that shows animals (as well as humans) in familiar situations to give practical advice on survival and how to be successful in the face of stupidity. Animals talk and act like the humans they represent. The purpose of the fable is to teach a specific life lesson and this is often summed up at the close of the story in a proverb eg. "Slow and steady wins the race." The most important collection is probably Aesop's fables. Aesop is believed to be a Greek slave of the 6th century BC. – his tales were handed down by word of mouth for hundreds of years before they were written down. Arnold Lobel's stories (*Fables*, the *Frog and Toad* series) are more contemporary fables.

MYTH... a myth is one story in a mythology – a group of stories that were once believed to be true. In myths, the world is occupied by supernatural beings and it is through their actions explanations are given for why the world is the way it is. In the cultures that developed them, they were, or still are, sacred stories speaking of the relationship between people and divine forces.

LEGEND... if the main character in the story is a person, who is known to have existed eg. Robin Hood, the story is not usually called a myth but legend.

POURQUOI ... [por-kwa] means "**why**" in French. Pourquoi tales are written to explain why things are the way they are and usually describe something in nature, for example, the story of the first coconut, why the crow is black, or how the chipmunk got its stripes. Pourquoi tales, which are often humorous, are great for studying differences between cultures.

FOLK OR FAIRY TALES ... the essence of these tales are the wonderful and strange beings and magical twists and turns. In these stories pumpkins turn into carriages, mirrors are enchanted, carpets fly.

When searching for fairy tales you will come across the **literary fairy tales** – stories that are identifiable as fairy tales but are born directly onto the page, that is, were written down at the start. Hans Christian Anderson, Oscar Wilde, Eleanor Farjeon. These tales are distinguished from the oral tales by the prose style, lengthy descriptive passages and literary diction.

PARABLE ... a parable is a teaching tale – story with a lesson embedded in it. Not as straight forward as a fable, a parable may require some thinking to disentangle the purpose. Parables often challenge our ethical or moral points of view.

TYPES

When searching for stories, you will find anthologies of folk tales, fairy tales, myths, legends and indigenous tales. Some of these will be collections from one culture eg. Turkish or English folk tales, The Arabian Nights. Some will be collections from around the world and some will be primary collections (the first collection of this type) eg. the Brothers Grimm. These are all stories with their roots in oral tradition.

The contents of anthologies are frequently arranged by country of origin: Asia and India, The Pacific, Central and South America.

Or they may be clustered into **story types**: Tricksters, Heroes, Fools, Shape Shifters, Wisdom, Animal tales.

All good global anthologies will say where the story is from and who originally told it, for example, the Limba people of Central Africa, or the Inuit of North America.

This arranging of stories is useful when searching for material for a specific purpose. Good anthologies also have well written Introductions which will deepen your understanding of oral traditions.

4. WHERE TO LOOK

Try your library:

Folktales: 398.2

Many myths and legends from religious traditions are in the 200s.

Retellings of folktales are often published as picture books.

Favourite Folk Tales from around the World edited by Jane Yolen (excellent introduction)

The Young Oxford Book of Folk Tales. Kevin Crossley Holland

The Internet.

There are hundreds of websites on the internet about storytelling. Below are some of our favourites.

<http://courses.unt.edu/efiga/STORYTELLING/StorytellingWebsites.htm> This page lists a large number of links to storytelling web sites.

<http://www.storyarts.org/> A focus on storytelling in the classroom and links with curriculum (beware: it is American)

<http://people.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/storfolk.html> Links to many sites with full text of traditional tales.

<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html> Texts of folktales, organised by theme and motif.

5. OTHER ORAL TRADITIONS

YARN or tall story ... a term usually referring to a humorous anecdote, sometimes with a 'sting in the tail'. Yarns are common in Australian tradition. Often known as the 'bush yarn', these tales are frequently about characters such as swaggies, bullockies, bushmen and miners.

Australian folklorists who have collected and published yarns: Bill Scott. Patsy Adam-Smith.

ANECDOTE ... an unembellished telling of a true incident

FAMILY STORY ... every family has its own stories which can be worked and developed into moving, funny and elucidating tales.

URBAN LEGENDS ... a fictional anecdote or story, which is circulated orally through a community and gains widespread credence, such as the belief that there are alligators in the sewers of New York. A misleading label as many of the legends have rural settings. Often the tellers of these tales believe them to be true and they will preface the story saying that it happened to "a friend of a friend of mine".

The Cane Toad High (first published as *Great Australia Urban Myths*) Graham Seal
Pelicans and Chihuahuas and Other Urban Legends. Bill Scott

There are sites on the internet that collect and publish urban myths, for example <http://www.snopes.com/>

NURSERY RHYMES ... for some, nursery rhymes will have been their first introduction to oral story telling. Revisiting this genre as an older child or adult can be fascinating. Some of these rhymes have their roots in historical events hundreds of years ago.

<http://www.famousquotes.me.uk>

RHYMES, CHANTS, RIDDLES ...

*Little Jack Horner sat in the corner
Eating his Christmas pie.
He thought it was rude to eat in the nude
So he put on his old school tie.*

Every year in playgrounds around the country rhymes, chants and riddles are exchanged, embellished and passed on – clapping rhymes, skipping rhymes, and as more bilingual children enter our schools, rhymes in LOTE!

Far Out, Brussel Sprout! Australian children's chants and rhymes. Compiled by June Factor

Let 'er Rip, Potato Chip! A fresh collection of Australian children's chants and rhymes. Compiled by Peter Durkin and Virginia Ferguson

The Riddle-o-pedia (volumes one and two) compiled by Cheryl Threadgold

6. GETTING STARTED – literary and oral language

It has often been said, by those that have decided to try telling stories, that the hardest part is letting go of the page. It takes courage.

Chose a simple short story, one that travels in a straight line, no digressions. Avoid literary fairy tales. It is a lot of work to change them to the oral language of storytelling.

Literary language is different from the language of the told story. Stories collected and retold by storytellers are usually in oral language, and do not require 'translation'. On the page, oral language looks deceptively simple. Much of the complexity and richness of the story is added in the telling, by gestures, voice, and in the mind of the listener who is conjuring up images.

Literary language

Far out in the ocean the water is as blue as the petals of the most beautiful cornflower, and as clear as the purest glass. But it is very deep – much deeper, indeed, than any cable can sound. Many steeples would have to be piled on top of the other to reach from the bottom to the surface of the water. Down there live the sea folk.

The Little Mermaid. Hans Christian Andersen

Oral Language

In the deepest part of the ocean, where humans cannot reach, live the sea folk.

Anthologists who have published collections in oral language include:
Margaret Read McDonald and Pat Thompson

7. LEARNING THE STORY

You will need to discover what works for you but here is a list of tips compiled from practitioners such as Mem Fox, Margaret Read Mc Donald, Anne E Stewart.

- Start simple.
- Make a summary of the main points of the story
- Clear out superfluous characters
- Visualise the sequence (some tellers say they see the story in an order of frames, and when they tell, they are describing what they are ‘seeing’.)
- Note the parts of the story that are strong
- Note any language ie. phrases, words that you think enhance the story
- Cater for the senses. Mention texture, taste, colour etc
- Work out the pacing of the story. Where is it fast, slow? Where are the pauses?
- Use your voice. Listen to people who you think use their voices well.
- Run the story through your mind rapidly or at a rapid whisper. The places where you hesitate are where you need to do more work.
- Remind yourself that story telling is not recitation. Although eventually patterns will take shape you will tell the story differently every time and that’s how it should be. Sometimes you will forget bits and that’s ok too.
- Practise beginnings and endings
- Practise. Practise. Practise. (Some like to practise on tape. Try the beach.)

Developing story memory

Each storyteller learns and memorises stories in a slightly different way. Some common approaches are:

1. Identifying and analysing the structure or pattern of the story. Oral stories often have an easy to identify structure, perhaps a journey with a number of meetings on the road. Some involve adding more and more characters met on the road.
2. Mapping the story structure. There are various ways to do this. Sometimes the map needs to show the journey undertaken.

Identify recurring patterns and use of language. eg the character meeting different people, or animals and asking them the same set of questions. Or the character helping several characters, and then later in the story, those characters help the protagonist, usually in the same order in which they were first met.

eg The Fisherman and his wife (Grimms Brothers)

1. Fisherman catches magical fish
2. Fish persuades fisherman to release it.
3. Fisherman tells wife to justify coming home empty handed.
4. Wife insists that he return to demand that the fish grant a wish.

The cumulative sequence begins. Wife makes six such requests for wishes (the number and content of the wishes varies from version to version). The cumulative (collective) effect is in the additive nature of the wishes granted.

- a. hovel to cottage
- b. cottage to castle
- c. castle to queen
- d. queen to emporer
- e. emperor to pope
- f. pope to God

5. Fish refuses to grant last wish.
6. Fisherman and wife are returned to living in their original hovel. The result of the last wish is pope to hovel, making the cumulative form cyclic.

(From Livo, N & Reitz S 1986, *Storytelling: process and practice*, Libraries Unlimited, Littleton Colorado.)

8. BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

The oral storyteller is clear when the story is beginning and when it is ended. They must be. There is no curtain opening and closing, rousing music or credits rolling. *Here are some traditional beginnings:*

Once upon a time when the world was new ...
Did you ever hear the story of ...
Back when the world was young and humans and animals could speak to each other
...
Before the world became as it is today ...
A story, a story, let it come, let it go ...
In a land that never was, in a time that never could be ...
Once on the far side of yesterday ...
Long, long ago, when there was more green and less noise ...

And some endings:

And ever since then, that is the way it has been.

And now the story is yours.
And the last person to tell this story .. is standing in front of you.
And that is the end of that!
The end.
Such things do happen you know.
And they all lived happily ever after .. or if they didn't, it's none of OUR business.

For more opening and closing see the following websites:

<http://www.folktale.net/openers.html>

<http://www.folktale.net/endings.html>

9. OPENING AND CLOSING THE STORY SESSIONS

The world of storytelling is full of ritual, from the ritual beginning with “Once upon a time. . . and “and they all lived happily ever after.”

Traditionally the storyteller can be seen as the one who guides the listeners into another world, the world of the story, and therefore has a different role from that of teacher. There can be no storytelling unless there is a clearly defined storyteller, although there are an infinite number of ways to be ‘storyteller’. Part of the role is to take the listeners into storyland, keep them safe while they are there, and then bring them safely back. Ritual openings and closings can serve this function.

The visiting storyteller would most likely use rituals, like chants, that a teacher in the classroom would find contrived in the context of telling one story in a lesson, however if you intend to make storytelling a regular part of the life of your classroom it would be worth considering what rituals you might develop that mark the beginnings and ends of sessions, or your transition from the role of teacher to that of storyteller. Some examples of this might be wearing a particular garment such as a story vest. This also might seem contrived, especially with older children but it can help the children settle and listen to the stories.

10. TELLING STORIES TO DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

Lower primary

Telling stories to young listeners can be a real test of your skill as a communicator. There are many classrooms around Australia comprising composite grades, children from linguistic backgrounds other than English, children with behaviour and attention disorders and children without any experience of preschool. Some guidelines:

- a) Create clear rituals for beginning and ending a story session.
- b) Tell stories that encourage interaction.
- c) Tell stories that have movement ie, opportunities for gestures.
- d) Start with short stories and short sessions.
- e) Repeat the favourites. Mem Fox in her book *Reading Magic* recommends three books a day, one favourite, one familiar, one unknown. When using stories this

pattern is worth bearing in mind however you can afford to evolve the repertoire more slowly.

f) **Tell the basics.** There are volumes of tales and rhymes that form the bedrock of oral storytelling. These stories appear in many cultures recognizable as other versions. Almost every culture has a story that you would be able to recognise as a Cinderella story. They began life as spoken tales. The freedom and delight of putting away the book and returning to oral telling cannot be overstated. The Gingerbread Man, Goldilocks, Three Billy Goats Gruff, Jack and the Beanstalk, Stone Soup, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella. These stories are our cultural property, they are there for us to play with. Change what you don't like, make up extra bits – think of them as clay. As time passes these students will return again and again to these wonder tales and the archetypal characters they contain in cartoons, sitcoms, novels like Harry Potter, movies like Shrek and plays - Shakespeare.

g) **Teach them the old songs, rhymes and skipping chants.** And then teach them some more. Ask parents and grandparents to share what they remember from their childhoods. Mem Fox has this to say: Rhymers will be readers: it's that simple.

h) And then there is all the rest – the rich world of folktales!

j) Institute a signal, or gesture that means “Ssh, back to the story now”. They need to know that you have it all under control and story time is safe. Storytelling with young children does not mean sitting quietly, backs straight, hands in laps. For some, movement aids thinking and verbal cues for joining in with animal sounds or rhymes will keep ears on target.

k) **Building your repertoire:**

- Dig into your memory of stories. You will probably find a fine collection of half remembered tales and rhymes from your childhood. You may be pleasantly surprised how little polishing they need before you share them with a class.
- If your stories are in another language, translate or if you can, tell the story in two languages. Bi-lingual telling is a great way to teach a second language.
- Teach rhymes in languages other than English.

A Band of Joining-in Stories collected by Pat Thompson. Corgi.

Upper primary and secondary

In the English classroom, students will return to the subject of oral traditions as critics, analysts and practitioners. Building on the experience of a wide range of storytelling, they will study varieties of narrative and learn the language of literary terms. In varying complexity they will explore stories through listening, discussing, reading and writing.

The oral tradition is a vast subject and a visit to the classroom of a professional storyteller may be useful. However with the skills and ideas presented in this workshop, you should be well equipped to explore this tradition with your students.

As students' competency increases, and with cooperative colleagues, there are many opportunities for learning stories and presenting them across the curriculum. Here's one for Biology.

A long time ago, when the world was young, a bee stored her combs full of rich honey and flew up to heaven to make an offering as a sacrifice. Zeus was so delighted with the gift that he promised to give her whatever she requested. She responded immediately, "Oh glorious Zeus, my maker and master, poor bee that I am, please give your servant a sting so that when anyone approaches my hive to take the honey, I may kill him on the spot." Now Zeus was horrified. For he had not expected the tiny bee's viciousness. Moreover, out of his love for humans, Zeus became angry and answered her, "You shall have your sting, but your request will not be granted the way you wish. When anyone comes to take away your honey and you attack him, the wound shall be fatal, not to him but to you, for you life shall go with your sting."

Aesop

Much has been written and said about the archaic nature of old tales. Once stories are collected, transcribed and published, they become frozen, they can no longer grow and change. Because of gender stereotypes and outmoded values, there has developed a wariness about using these tales. These very issues can make for some feisty discussion and analyses. If it is appropriate, it is a challenging task to take the old story, "defrost it" and retell it in the contemporary milieu. (*Princess Smartypants* Babette Cole). Or use the genre to create new fables. (*Angela's Mandrake and other Feisty Fables*. Jennifer Rowe. Allen and Unwin.)

USEFUL TEXTS

The Macquarie Dictionary

Favourite Folktales from around the World edited by Jane Yolen

A Guide to Australian Folklore from Ned Kelly to Aeroplane Jelly. Gwenda Davey and Graham Seal.

Museum Theatre. Communicating with Visitors Through Drama. Catherine Hughes

Reading Magic. Mem Fox

Creative Storytelling. Jack Zipes. Routledge

Princess Smartypants Babette Cole

Angela's Mandrake and other Feisty Fables. Jennifer Rowe. Allen and Unwin.

A Band of Joining-in Stories collected by Pat Thompson. Corgi.

There have been many books published on how to tell stories. Go to your local library and do a search on STORYTELLING. Most libraries will have several books, but they are often stored on the desk of the children's librarian, so you may need to request them. Also academic institutions where they teach education will have books on storytelling in their collection.