

Storytelling 101

Close the Book and Tell: Using Folktales to Build Literacy, Listening Skills, and Cultural and Emotional Competence

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Overview

Questions for this session

- Why is it worthwhile to tell stories?
- What is the relationship between literacy and storytelling?
- What skills are involved in telling stories to children?
- What kinds of resources are needed, and where are they available?
- How can we use stories to build emotional and cultural competence?

Goals for the children we work with:

- To learn authentically and deeply.
- To feel safe and connected to those around them.
- To learn in ways that fit their individual learning styles.
- To be ready to read.
- To expand their experiences and knowledge of the world.
- To be creative, imaginative, and flexible in their thinking.
- To be kind, compassionate, and joyful.
- To love stories.

Storytelling can help to reach each of those goals.

Our brains are incredibly complex. If every neuron in our brain were connected to every other neuron, there would be more connections than there are atoms in the universe. Although we have much in common, each of us is unique in how we learn.

Storytelling works in ways that fit with what research tells us about how the brain works. Young children need relationships, safety, emotion, meaning, and repetition to learn well.

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Understandings

- Storytelling is critical for children to expand their imaginations
- Storytelling helps children to make sense of their world.
- Storytelling engages deep parts of the brain.
- Mirror neurons create connection between listener and teller.

Activities

- Storytelling relies on voice, face, gesture, and imagination.
- Start with stories that are short.
- Use participation where possible.
- Only tell stories that you like.
- Children may want you to repeat stories.
- It's good for them to hear different versions of the same story.
- Use books, storytelling, pictures, puppets, drawings and dramatic play to explore stories.
- Do storytelling activities with children that include voice, face, gesture, and imagination.

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Storytellers use three elements to create a performance: voice, gesture and facial expression. Here are some ways to explore these elements with your students.

Voice consists of speed, volume, tone, expression, rhythm, choice of words and timing.

1. Have individual students take a phrase like “I lost my homework” or “I’m late for dinner” and say it with different emotions. For example - happy, sad, scared, bored, “too cool,” frustrated, angry...

2. Have a student stand in front of the class. Have them speak or read a few sentences softly. Then have them speak a few more, not shouting, but loud enough to fill the whole room.

3. Have an adult read a paragraph as quickly as possible, absurdly so. Then read a second paragraph very, very slowly.

Either after each exercise or after all three, discuss with students how the volume, the speed, and the expressiveness of the speakers reflect nervousness or excitement that ALL people speaking in front of groups feel. Also talk about how it was to listen to these different ways of speaking, and how it was to be the speaker. Ask students to notice these elements in the storytelling performance.

Gesture is how a storyteller uses their body.

1. Have students stand in a circle. One student says an action sentence, like “I hit a ball” or “she chopped the tree.” As they speak, have them also do/mime the action (swinging a bat or lifting an axe.) Then have all the other students together echo back the phrase and the action. Continue around the circle.

2. Repeat the game, but this time have students do the action with just one hand. It should be enough to suggest the action but not be a full-bodied enactment.

Discuss with students how each type of gesture felt to them, as audience and as actor. Some storytellers walk and move around the room and are very animated. Others sit and do not move much. Have students notice gestures that the performing storyteller uses.

Expression/Face includes eye contact as well as facial expression.

1. Talk with your students while staring off randomly into space, looking at corners or the ceiling and out the window. Ask them what you are doing that’s strange.

2. Talk with your students while focusing intently on just one person. Again, ask them what is odd.

Discuss their reactions to your different styles, and the importance of eye contact. Model good eye contact, and have them try individually. This, as in most of these exercises, is a lesson that extends farther into life.

3. Have individual students face the class and make emotional statements that are the opposite of their facial expression. “I’m so mad” while smiling, “I’m so excited” while looking bored. Discuss this connection between facial expression and tone of voice. Ask students to notice how the storyteller uses facial expressions.

Resources

BOOKS

Armstrong, Thomas *Multiple Intelligence in the Classroom*
Hamilton, Martha and Mitch Weiss. *Children Tell Stories*.
Jensen, Eric *Arts with the Brain in Mind*
Haven, Kendall *Story Proof* Libraries Unlimited, 2008

WEB SITES

<http://perpetualpreschool.com/>
<http://www.artsedge.org/>
<http://www.preschoollearningonline.com/>
<http://www.everythingpreschool.com/>
www.preschoolrainbow.org
www.songsforteaching.com
www.cmnonline.org
<http://www.mgol.net/public/articles/dendrites.pdf>
<http://www.jackstreet.com/jackstreet/WMUS.Honig.cfm>

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The Turnip

Once upon a time there were two brothers. Both went into the army. One, named Karl, prospered, though he was a lazy and sometimes evil man. The other, named Hans, worked hard and followed orders, but did not rise up in the ranks. When they were discharged, they returned to their village.

Karl lived in a big house and did little all day.

Hans lived in a small shack outside of town. He decided to take up farming. He planted turnips. He cared for them, and they began to grow.

But one turnip grew much larger than the rest. One week it was as big as an orange. The next, it was as big as a watermelon. The next, as big as a donkey. The next as big as an ox, and the next, as big as Hans' house.

What to do with the turnip? Hans decided to give it to the king. He borrowed a large wagon and four oxen, and with his neighbors' help, he loaded it onto the wagon.

The king was very surprised at this unusual gift. "One gift surely deserves another," said the king. "And how shall I reward you?" He paused, and then called to his servant. "We must reward this man. Bring gold and silver and fine clothing." Hans' wagon was loaded with this wealth, and he returned to his house rich.

Karl noticed that Hans was suddenly wealthy. He was jealous. He went to Hans and asked him how he came to be so rich. Hans told him that he had given the king a magnificent turnip, and been rewarded with gold and silver and fine clothes.

Karl returned home, and thought to himself, "if the king rewards Hans so richly for a turnip, how much more might he reward me if my gifts were truly valuable?" He loaded up his own wagon with all of his gold and silver and finest clothes and headed to the palace.

The king looked at the fine gifts that Karl had brought. He looked carefully at Karl. "One gift surely deserves another," said the king. "And how shall I reward you?" He paused, and then called to his servant. "We must reward this man. Bring the turnip."

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Karl returned to his house with the giant turnip on his wagon. He was a poorer but wiser man. And all through the winter, at least he had enough to eat.

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Sweet Porridge

There was once a little girl who lived alone with her mother. They were very poor and had little to eat. One day, walking in the woods, the girl met an old woman who gave her a magic pot. "If you say, 'cook, little pot' it will make good sweet porridge. Say 'cease little pot' and it will stop.

The child brought the pot home to her mother, and they no longer had to worry about hunger.

One day, when the girl was out, the mother said, "Cook, little pot." The pot cooked, and she ate her fill, but when she wanted the pot to stop, it wouldn't, because she had forgotten the magic words.

The pot went right on cooking, and filled up the pot until it overflowed. It kept on cooking. Soon the kitchen and the whole house were full. Then the house next door and the whole street were filled with porridge.

No one knew what to do, until the little girl returned. Finally, when there was only a single house left unfilled, the girl came back. She said, "Cease, little pot" and the pot stopped. But anyone who wanted to get back to town had to eat their way through.

from Grimm's Fairy Tales

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How Rabbit Lost His Tail

Once Rabbit met Fox, who was carrying a long string of fish.

“How did you get all those nice fish, Mr. Fox?” said Rabbit.

“Come with me, I’ll show you,” replied Fox.

Fox led Rabbit to a pond which was frozen over. He cut a hole in the ice. “Now, you sit here all night, and in the morning you’ll have a nice string of fish.”

Rabbit sat all night on the pond, with his tail hanging down into the cold water. When he felt a tug, he assumed it must be fish biting his tail.

But in the morning, Rabbit was stuck. The ice had frozen around tail, holding him fast. He pulled and pulled, but couldn’t get loose.

Owl came and pulled his ears, but he couldn’t get Rabbit out. All he succeeded in doing was to lengthen his ears, which is why Rabbit’s ears are long to this day.

Other animal friends came, and they pulled and pulled. Finally, with a “Pop” Rabbit came loose. Unfortunately, his tail remained in the ice. So that’s why Rabbit’s have long ears, and short tails, to this very day.

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The Boy Who Cried Wolf

Once upon a time a boy was sent by his father up to the fields to watch the sheep. He was given strict instructions to call for help if he saw a wolf, for otherwise the sheep might be eaten.

The boy went out every morning with the sheep, to the pastures. He watched them carefully. But after a few days, he got bored. He started shouting, "Wolf, wolf, wolf" and very quickly the townspeople ran up with their pitchforks and knives.

But when they arrived at the pasture, the boy was lounging against a tree. "Fooled you," he laughed.

"You shouldn't do that again," said the people, and went back down.

"I won't," called the boy, after them.

But a few days later, the boy did the same thing. He shouted out, "Wolf, wolf, help, wolf" and the townspeople came running again.

"Fooled you again," laughed the boy.

"You mustn't do that again," said the people.

"Okay," said the boy.

The next day, the boy was watching the sheep when he caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye. It was a wolf. He began to shout, "Wolf, wolf, help."

But the townspeople who heard him just nodded their heads at one another. "There he goes again. We won't be fooled this time."

The boy kept shouting. The townspeople finally decided to go and see what was going on. But as they approached the pasture, the shouting stopped.

When they got close, the sheep were gone, and the boy sat alone..

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The Three Wishes

Once upon a time a poor woodcutter went to the woods to chop a tree. He came to a part of the forest where he had never been. He spotted a large and beautiful tree. As he raised his axe, he heard a voice from within the tree cry out.

"Please don't cut down this tree. It is my home."

It was a wood nymph, sitting high on a branch, who spoke.

"Very well," said the wood cutter.

"Since you are so kind, I will give you three wishes," said the nymph.

The woodcutter headed home. He didn't believe in magic. When he got home, he sat at the table. His wife served him a crust of bread and bowl of thin soup for supper.

"Is this all there is? I wish I had a big sausage."

Suddenly a fat juicy sausage appeared on his plate.

"Where did that come from?" asked his wife.

The woodcutter remembered the wood nymph's words. He explained what had happened to him. Immediately, the wife began to complain and insult the woodcutter. "How could you waste a precious wish on something as small as a sausage? We could have had a fine home, or good clothes, or gold, but, no, instead, you waste a magical wish on a sausage."

"Woman, quiet. Enough. You always attack me." They argued back and forth, their voices rising, until the woodcutter burst out with, "I wish this sausage were on your nose."

Instantly, the sausage was attached to her face.

"What have you done? Take it off right now," she yelled.

"If I do, I don't ever want to hear that I wasted a wish."

"Yes, yes. Just take it off."

The woodcutter made his final wish, to remove the sausage. He and his wife lived the rest of their days as poor as they had ever been.

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