The Tale, The Teller, the Telling, and the Told

David Booth

In our contemporary world, opportunities for experiencing storytelling are often missing in the lives of many children. Aside from television’s passive, non-interactive storytelling, some children hear no stories read or told until they go to school. With broken families, crowded schedules, new curricula, and urban development comes the tragedy of children without a storehouse of stories. Grandparents who might have told stories may be unavailable or live far away; the home may not be a storying place; stories may be foreign objects; television and computers may dominate the home and limit talk-time; parents may be shift workers; single parents may lack time and energy for sharing stories; storytelling may not be considered a significant experience by the adults in the home. It may be that school will have to bear the burden of story on its shoulders, and that teachers will be the storytellers who reach most children.

We know that things happen to people when they hear stories. Any theory about the place of story in schools has to begin with this fact. Story is not an exercise in explanation or persuasion, but an experience between the teller and the told. How a storyteller feels about an event can determine how (or if) it is remembered. The emotional intensity of an experience will influence the way the memory is affected by the storytelling. In considering a story truth, we need to attempt to understand what we think the teller might have been feeling, thinking and doing at the time of the experience, as well as the effect of the context of the telling – who is listening and why, and what the consequences of the telling will be. And, I have to add, the tale we choose to tell can determine who listens and why, and the context for the telling can make or break both the teller and the effect of the telling on the told. In storytelling, everything matters: the tale, the teller, the telling and the told.

Stories are generated from our memories of past events, and we use them to guide future actions accordingly. The calling to mind of prior experiences to help understand current situations often leads to new insights. Past experiences help make sense of new experiences, which is at the core of intelligent behaviour. Intelligence allows us to make sense of confusing prior events, as we draw on these events to interpret new events.

When stories are retold, the words change, but the ideas remain more or less the same. The audience often determines the words chosen, and the ideas expressed may depend on the interpretation of past events in light of current events.

Story can help us to gain an understanding of the complexity of our emotional responses, demonstrated by the expressive voices of characters speaking eloquently and powerfully of their feelings. We cannot teach children emotions; we can only help them reveal them and attempt to understand them. Children must filter their emotional experiences through their intellects, making sense of all kinds of information, turning story experiences over and over in their minds, and integrating thought and feeling. Children can think and feel with the images that story offers them, storing them in the “museums of their minds” and classifying them for later use.

The imaginative use of language produces both intellectual and emotional responses. Vicariously, the listener will experience other places, other times, and other life styles; they may identify with others or find their own self-identity; they may observe nature more closely or from a different perspective; they will encounter the thrill of taking risks and meeting mysteries; they will endure suffering; they will enjoy a sense of achievement and feel they belong to the greater community. They will be challenged to dream, to ponder, and to ask questions of themselves.

Consider the language children meet in a story: words they can absorb into their own language data bases; expressions that range from the archaic to the jazziest contemporary slang; patterns that ring in their ears and seduce them into joining in. How much fun it can be to share a good story, to be delighted or surprised by words artfully arranged to create a narrative. Children tune in to the wonders of language, to the power that lies in becoming the one who stories.

Given the opportunity, children come to know the anatomy of story: its forms, genres, motifs, patterns, universals, words and images. Story acquaints children (even those who do not or cannot read) with a variety of language patterns, some of which may be outside their language community. It can familiarize them with literary language, an awareness they will need as readers and
writers. And the words that are found in story - where else would a child meet them? Words from other times and places, words found only in print, shared by storytellers with magic literary storehouses, idioms, expressions, metaphors, allusions - all to be met and savoured, some to be retained in the mind's eye.

Stories train and educate our sensibilities and our emotional responses. Through their strong appeal to the imagination they offer pathways through the difficult stuff of our existence. They are wonderful windows of opportunity for parents and teachers to develop stronger and more flexible skills for settling conflicts, bolstering self-esteem and emphasizing the need for gender equality.

Children today need to learn tolerance, understanding, and getting on with others, and storyteller Bob Barton says that among the best examples of stories which emphasize these qualities are the world's folktales. These "stories of the tribe" provide strong reading and listening materials for children. The context of "long ago" enables children to explore a variety of problems and concerns that have troubled humanity forever, but in a safe, non-threatening framework. The deeds of heroes, the schemes of tricksters, the lore of nations past, can all serve as settings for children's own development - family situations, societal difficulties, supernatural beliefs and natural phenomena.

Stories offer us good counsel and can be a source of comfort, connecting us to other aspects of life: they put us in touch with larger things like laughter, love, mercy and compassion. Stories can cause us to raise profound questions and shape the landscape of our minds for the whole of our lives.

The children interviewed by Donald Fry for his book Children Talk about Books indicate in their comments that, for them, stories provide a "living through" experience, not just a "knowing about." It is from the stories that deeply involve them that they see played out the facts of their own lives that concern them deeply. Stories are not just amusements. They can cause us to tap into the universal situations of life, to stand in the shoes of others in all the world's past, present and future, taking risks, suffering, sorrowing, laughing, wondering, challenging, feeling satisfied. We learn from the stories of others, and we take the truths of those narratives, the bits and pieces, and weave them into our own life tales. In this manner, our stories connect us to the "others" in our lives, and we hold hands in the story circle.

References


Professor David Booth is a well-known professor of education who teaches courses in language literacy and literature. Dr. Booth has authored many teacher reference books and texts and is a world renowned speaker and advocate for children's language literacy. His coauthored books such as Classroom Voices, Poetry Goes to School and The Arts go to School are used extensively in schools.

Conference Announcement
The Ninth Annual University College of Cape Breton Symposium on Story-telling is planned for June 2005, Sydney, Nova Scotia. The focus of the symposium is story as an historical document, proof that "History is what happens to real people". To receive details and the call for papers (and stories) please contact Professor Afra Kavanagh at afra_Kavanagh@uccb.ca or phone 902-563-1431.