The Power of Storytelling: An interview with Afra Kavanagh

Afra Kavanagh and Raymond T. Chodzinski

I first met Afra Kavanagh in 1997 at the first storytellers symposium held in Cape Breton, sponsored in part by the University of Cape Breton. She is committed to sharing how the "power of story" shapes and influences lives.

This first symposium resulted in a rich mosaic of storytellers, professors, teachers, librarians, folklorists and native tellers from Canada and the United States who along with many listeners attended to simply share their love for storytelling. It is obvious that the work done by Kavanagh and her committee has contributed significantly to the success of the symposium and to the ongoing sharing of stories by way of research and performance.

The symposia have produced two books edited by Professor Kavanagh, *The Power of the Story* (1998) and *Women in Storytelling* (2000). Each book brings together a collaboration of storytellers and academics collectively and imaginatively presented to engage the reader in the mysteries and joys of storytelling as a record of the human need to tell and share stories about the diversity of living life on this planet.

My interview with Afra was conducted at the most recent symposium which featured many well known storytellers, academics, teachers and alike from Cape Breton, Ontario, New Brunswick, Illinois, Florida, New York, South Carolina, Louisiana, Ireland and Wales.

Professor Kavanagh is to be commended for her pioneering work in helping to spread the message that teachers can be powerful storytellers. She, as all storytellers know well, is convinced that children of all ages love to listen to and tell stories. Teachers that tell stories know that storytelling has the power to motivate, enhance student attention, reduce discipline problems, create energized lessons and involve students at a level that may not have occurred with out the power of the story present in the classroom.

Kavanagh

Reading is a much more private act, and for me is an academic activity: I study what I read. The material has an important formal structure that I cannot ignore. In oral storytelling, if I am the listener, I tend to give myself over to the story and the storyteller and to be less "critical." I feel a child-like appreciation for the story, and may not awaken till much later to the "meaning" or meanings of the story.

Chodzinski

Why do you believe it is it important for teachers to encourage storytelling in schools and classrooms?

Kavanagh

There are many reasons why storytelling should be encouraged in classrooms. I will mention three. The first is that there is nothing that can better bring to the attention of students the importance of language choice and of ordering the material in a story than a well (or badly) told story. Flat on its face or a buzz-maker? Depends on language and structure! The second is that it can be a vehicle for civic, moral or spiritual instruction; and the third, it builds bridges between people because it is a social activity that always draws in the other, the listener.

Chodzinski

It is standard to expect [that] teachers of literature or those who teach young children will use storytelling in their classroom work but how can teachers of other disciplines use storytelling to enhance their classroom experiences?

Kavanagh

A colleague of mine who teaches Biology, Dr. Cheryl Bartlett uses anecdote to capture the personal aspects of research in science (Who can forget the "Eureka" story we were all told about
Archimedes discovery!). She also insists on their becoming familiar with and gaining an understanding of metaphor, a literary device that is a major element in storytelling, and, she believes, in scientific thinking.

Chodzinski
What kinds of stories are best told by teachers? Why?

Kavanagh
As I mentioned earlier, storytelling has been used as a vehicle for civic, moral or spiritual instruction. Stories that reinforce values that are culturally desirable may be used in the public school. School counselors may also use the life-story as a way to get students to see themselves and the patterns they have fallen into more objectively. There is much written about self as story in psychoanalytic literature.

Chodzinski
How does a teacher begin to learn how to tell a story?

Kavanagh
Teachers must learn how to tell a story in the same way they learn any other “art.” They must watch other practitioners closely, then they must practice: first in front of a mirror, second, in front of a friendly audience.

Chodzinski
Please share an experience or two you have had with storytelling in schools and communities that changed or motivated students in one way or another.

Kavanagh
In my classroom, when I tell the story of a novel that I don’t intend to teach, I seem to succeed in arousing student interest to read further. It seems that summarizing the novel reduces it to plot and characters or to plain story succeeds in capturing students who still have a lot of the child in them, and think stories are for pleasure, but books are for “study.”

Chodzinski
In your book The Power of Story we are reminded that stories are not just entertainment, nor about history only, nor about anyone thing. They are about our deepest functions as humans. They are thinking, self creation and survival. That is in part the reason why oral storytelling has become such a focus for study. Please elaborate.

Kavanagh
There is a visible evidence of the growing awareness of the importance of the role of stories and the people that tell them, whether they are parents, grandparents, or professional storytellers. It is seen as an aid in identity formation for both individuals and cultures. Storytelling is recognized by its practitioners as an important tool for teaching and learning. Important is that we as listeners understand that our relationship to a story is ever changing as we retell rewrite or reinterpret it-in other words, assign it personal, historical or mythical truth. The dynamic relationship of reciprocal influence between humans and narrative may be observed in the way different cultures and different eras value different stories, or the same stories differently.

The Power of the Story is found in how it affects us personally and how we use story to understand ourselves and the world around us. Teachers can help students find meaning in life through curriculum that uses story to enhance the learning process.

Bibliography

These books may be obtained through:
University College of Cape Breton Press, Inc.
P.O.Box 5300
Sydney, Nova Scotia B1P 6L2

Afra Kavanagh is an assistant Professor at the University College of Cape Breton. She is widely known for her work in promoting storytelling and is the founder of the annual symposium on storytelling convened in Sydney, Nova Scotia. She has published two books and several articles related to the Power of story.

“We have evidence of histories, oral and written, that go back a long time suggesting that there has always been an urge towards narrating, and towards narrating as a way to communicate past events and knowledge to present and future generations. Teachers who want to affect an understanding in their students may want to invest more time into telling, hearing, and interpreting stories with their students”.