Classroom Story Telling and Resources

Bruce Carmody

To be human is to be a storyteller. When we see our friends or colleagues after an absence, we tell the story about what has happened since we were last together. Families gather and we tell our stories. Often we re-tell the old stories that everyone has heard before. "Remember the time when" is a frequent refrain.

When we say that we "don't really know" someone, we mean that we don't yet know his or her story.

Storytelling is as old as humankind. We have been storytellers for as long as we have had language to express our ideas. The tradition of telling stories, real or imagined, was both a form of entertainment and a way of preserving history in early societies. We use stories in many ways: to pass on important lessons, to explain how the world was shaped and created, to remember the events that we don't want to forget. In early civilizations, every village had its own storyteller, an individual charged with remembering the stories and beliefs of the collective.

All of the world's religions have story at their centre. Stories offer us new possibilities. Sometimes they show us what might be or could be. They offer us new ways in which to live. In that way stories are often healing for both the listener and the teller.

The power of stories lies in their ability to "let us in". We can both come to own the story and also come to see ourselves within the story. Today therapists are discovering that stories can play an important role in healing individuals both emotionally and spiritually. Caregivers are learning the importance of encouraging the elderly and the terminally ill to tell their own personal stories as a way of bringing a sense of completeness and fulfillment as a life draws to its end.

At the same time in schools, teachers are discovering the usefulness of story in the classroom. Even students with "short attention spans" are drawn into a well-told story and become better listeners. Storytelling can be used in many curriculum areas including language, social studies, science, drama and even mathematics. Stories have a way of sticking in our memories, partly because they tell about us.

While we have become accustomed in our society to finding our stories in books or on film, storytelling, as a tradition, continues in many societies around the world. Throughout North America there exist groups dedicated to preserving storytelling as entertainment and as an art form. In fact, in recent years there has been a revival of interest in storytelling as people rediscover how stories, well told, can both entertain, teach and even heal.

We will not all be drawn by the same stories, but each of us can find stories that speak to us and speak about us. The greatest joy can come in the searching for just the right tale!

The Role of Storytelling in the Schools

Storytelling
- engages our imaginations
- promotes language development
- encourages reading
- teaches us about other cultures and other times
- helps us to understand ourselves and others

Listening to stories as they are told by another:
- develops listening skills
- increases concentration
- develops vocabulary
- develops a sense of story
- motivates students to read

Learning to tell stories to others:
- improves oral language skills
- improves story writing
- develops the students' understanding of plot and sequence
- encourages reading and critical thinking skills

Storytelling can be integrated into many subject areas across the curriculum.

While language arts and the creative arts are obvious areas, stories can help us to understand other cultures and other times. They can easily be integrated into history, geography and social studies programs. Carefully chosen stories can also be integrated into the mathematics programs.

Storytelling can be a powerful tool for recognizing and validating the cultures of immigrant students.
TEACHING & LEARNING

1. Tell and re-tell. Teacher tells (or reads) a story to class. Individuals re-tell the same story in pairs, in small groups, or to the whole class. Sometimes it is not necessary to have one child tell the whole story but rather take turns until the story is told. Variation: the small group chooses a storyteller and helps him/her prepare the story for telling to the whole class.

2. Tell a familiar story from another perspective.

Example: the wolf’s viewpoint in Little Red Riding Hood.

3. Tell a personal story about something that happened to you, about someone who is important in your life.

4. Tell “whoppers” or tall tales. Start a “Liars’ Club”. Who can tell the wildest tale?

5. Conduct interviews with well-known story characters. The teacher may be the “interviewer” while the children play the role of the famous character.

6. Create your own stories following the typical format of a folk tale. Who is the hero? What challenge must be overcome? What obstacles are presented to prevent the hero from reaching the goal? How are they overcome? Element of magic?

7. Map out the main events that occur in a story to aid in the telling.

8. Give the students a story outline and have them tell it filling out the details to make the story more interesting.

9. Examine stories that should be read rather than told because the language needs to be maintained as it was written or because the pictures carry the story.

10. Make a display of: story openings “Once upon a time…” heroes/heroines villains magic spells story endings

11. Examine different kinds of stories: fables, legends, fairy tales etc.

12. Have older students learn stories that they can tell to younger children in the school.

13. Start a “Storytellers’ Club” where stories are shared.

14. Challenge students to learn a story that someone in the family remembers from childhood.

15. Have a multicultural festival, learning and telling stories from many cultures.

16. Integrate stories from other cultures or other eras into the social studies program.

17. Find several versions of the same story, eg Cinderella.

18. Collect “creation stories” – why the bear has a short tale, why the hare is always running, etc

A Short Bibliography for Storytellers


Barbeau, Marius and Michael Hornyansky. The Golden Phoenix and Other Fairy Tales from Quebec. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.

Barton, Bob. 1986. Tell me Another. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers Ltd.


Barton, Bob and David Booth David. 1990. Stories in the Classroom. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers Ltd.


Helm Meade, Erica. 2001. The Moon in the Well Open Court, Chicago, IL.


Note: While these 3 books by William White are listed as resources for Christian storytelling, they are a wonderful resource of stories that can be used in any context. Most of the stories are not obviously “religious” in nature.


More and more storytellers are turning to the web as a source for stories. A bit of searching can lead you to Native Stories, Folklore from almost any country in the world, ghost stories or almost any other topic imaginable.

However, web sites come and go and I'm always somewhat reluctant to say, "Here are some good sites for stories," when those sites may be gone tomorrow. Having said that, here are some sites that were active the last time I checked:

- http://www.indians.org/welker/bear.htm
- http://www.indigenouspeople.org/ipl_final.html
- http://www.folkart.com/home/tales.htm
- http://www.americanfolklore.net (click on the links or use the pop-up menu to find lots of stories)
- http://home.earthlink.net/~natali/ coyote/
- http://www.eldrbarry.net (Click on the "Raven" link.)
- http://www.indiana.edu/~afrist/Beaver/Folktales.html
- http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/fooltexts.html
- or try
- http://www.longlongtimeago.com

Bruce Carmody is a retired educator and seasoned storyteller. Bruce performs for children and adults and is currently President of the Storytellers School of Toronto and a member of Storytellers Canada. He is the storyteller in residence at the Young Street Mission. He is an invited teller at schools and festivals and is a well known for his work in developing programs for the Ontario school Curriculum. Readers may contact Bruce Carmody at bruce@storytree.ca

Conference Announcement

Story Tellers of Canada Annual Conference will be held in Calgary, Alberta, July 20-24, 2005.

For information contact
Mary Hayes, Conference Co-Chair at storymary@hotmail.com or Karen Gummo, Conference Co Chair at karengummo@shaw.ca or visit http://www.sc-cc.com or email coordinator at www.sc-cc.com for links to this conference and others.

Brock University and CCCAH Centro Cultural e de Congressos ANGRADOHEROISMO announce the Third International Conference on Storytelling and Cultural Identity to be held in Tereceira Azores Portugal, June 27-29.

Deadline for papers has past but conference attendance is welcomed.

Contact Dr. Mario Cabral Director CCCAH at ccahbral@cm-ah.pt or Dr. Francis Cota Fagundes, Spanish and Portuguese University of Massachusetts Amherst fagundes@spanport.umass.edu or Dr. Irene Blayer, Modern Languages, Brock University, Ontario, Canada at blayer@spartan.ac.brocku.ca