

Why Children Should Be Given the Opportunity To Tell Stories

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Why teach students the craft of storytelling? Because it is one of the most important life skills one can learn. It's difficult to be successful if you're not a good communicator and communication is, at its most basic level, the ability to tell a story well, whether to one person or to a group. Most of us will use reading and writing in our chosen professions, but *all* of us will use speaking and listening. Yet in the past, these two literacy skills have received little attention compared to reading and writing. However, there is growing recognition among educators that literacy is more effectively taught when reading, writing, speaking, and listening are seen as connected and equally important.

Teachers through the ages have used stories as an educational tool. Why? Because stories are the way we store information in the brain. Miscellaneous facts and data are easily forgotten unless they are put into a narrative context. 'Storying,' or the process of constructing stories in the mind, is one of the most fundamental ways of making meaning, and thus pervades all aspects of learning. We encourage teachers to not only tell stories, but also to have students make them up and tell them as well. A favorite example that seems to get teachers thinking creatively about how to use storytelling in the classroom is from Barbara Lipke's *Figures, Facts, and Fables: Telling Tales in Science and Math*:

One day I had just finished teaching [my sixth graders] a lesson on how to read tree rings. We had a cross section of a tree and practiced reading it. We'd talked about what the different marks on the cross section meant. I wanted to know whether my students had understood the lesson.

"You have three minutes," I said. "Turn to your neighbor and tell her or him a story based on what you've just learned. You can be anything you want; an insect, a tree, a sidewalk, a scientist, a woodcutter."

I waited. I walked around and eavesdropped. At the end of four minutes I had the students switch; tellers became listeners and a new set of stories were created. We took time and shared some of the stories. Susan told a story about a carpenter ant in dire straits because it had eaten all the rotten wood within reach and was stuck by its waist, unable to go backward or forward. Mark told his story from the point of view of a vain tree ring who bemoaned the fact that it would bear the scar of a lightning strike forever. Some of the students chose to write and illustrate their stories. Some taped them and some told them to younger brothers and sisters at home. Some felt that their stories weren't worth preserving, and that was all right too. But all the students remembered a great deal about how to read tree rings! Telling the stories, even on a very informal, spur-of-the-moment basis, helped the students internalize the information. The stories they created and told fixed the information in a context. It was now theirs. (1996, p. 25, Heinemann Pub.)

There are many rewards to be gained from having students tell folktales, authored stories, and their own tales. Storytelling should be done both formally and informally so that students learn to speak confidently in front of groups. Here are a few more reasons students should be given the opportunity to tell stories:

1. Storytelling increases self-esteem. With the greatest risk comes the greatest sense of achievement. One child wrote: "The hardest thing I've ever done was telling my story in front of my class and all those parents that night. But it was also the best thing that ever happened in my life when everyone in the audience applauded for me." That kind of confidence lingers and spills over into other aspects of life.

2. Storytelling, unlike some arts or sports activities, can involve *all* youngsters regardless of ability level. Children often surprise teachers, parents, other kids, and *themselves* with their storytelling skills. One teacher wrote: "Storytelling is within the grasp of each child so everyone can participate. The success of kids who don't usually do well in school was surprising and especially rewarding for me, but also for the other kids." Children often gain respect for others whom they thought weren't as capable as them. Many teachers have also remarked about how a storytelling project improves class cooperation.

3. Showing poise and confidence when speaking in front of others comes with practice and experience. In surveys in which adults are asked to name their greatest fear, speaking in front of a group always comes first. The more children are encouraged to do oral presentations while they're young, the easier it will be for them when they're older. Through storytelling, children learn techniques for gaining and holding an audience's attention (eye contact, use of voice, gestures, pacing, etc.).

4. Storytelling improves listening skills. The pure pleasure children experience while listening to stories helps them to associate listening with enjoyment. During a classroom storytelling project, students learn to listen respectfully to their peers and how to coach one another in a constructive way.

5. Learning a story, rather than memorizing, ensures a much better sense of story, sequence, cause and effect, and character traits. Comprehension skills *must* be used in order to learn a story and tell it well. Telling stories improves and reinforces other language skills such as vocabulary, story recall, and reading aloud with expression and confidence.

6. Storytelling encourages creative writing. For example, during the course of a project where students tell folktales, they learn not only their own stories but those of their classmates as well. It's as if they go inside a story and live there for a while. By doing so, they discover, on a visceral level, what makes a good story. Their own subsequent stories show much more creative use of dialogue and contain more of the standard story components: beginning and end, plot, characters, setting, and theme.

7. Storytelling stimulates inventive thinking and imagination. Albert Einstein once said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." If children choose a folk story and, in keeping with the oral tradition, make it their own in the retelling, they learn to be creative, to think on their feet.

8. Telling stories instills a love of language in children and motivates them to read. From folktales they develop an understanding of other people, places, and cultures, and learn to appreciate diversity.

9. Perhaps most important of all, storytelling is fun! One father, who had watched his own child and her classmates tell stories in front of parents and peers, wrote to our local school district to ask that funding for storytelling continue: "Storytelling is an important activity with many long-term benefits for kids. I've noticed many young adults in business who lack even basic skills in communicating their ideas to others verbally, particularly to a group. Storytelling gives kids a real jump on acquiring these skills. In addition, it develops something that many practiced speakers lack, namely an ability to use expression and humor to captivate and motivate their audiences. An added benefit is that I have rarely seen a bunch of kids so motivated to do a 'school' activity. How can we lose with all these benefits and *fun*?"

For more information, see our website at www.beautyandthebeaststorytellers.com or our books:

Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom (R. C. Owen, 2005)

Stories in My Pocket: Tales Kids Can Tell (Fulcrum, 1996)

How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell (August House, 1999)

Noodlehead Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell (August House, 2000)

Through the Grapevine: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell (August House, 2001)

The Hidden Feast: A Folktale from the American South (August House, 2006)

Scared Witless: Thirteen Eerie Tales to Tell (August House, 2006)

A Tale of Two Frogs: A Russian Folktale (August House/Story Cove, 2006)

Priceless Gifts: A Folktale from Italy (August House, 2007)

Rooster's Night Out: A Folktale from Cuba (August House/Story Cove, 2007)