

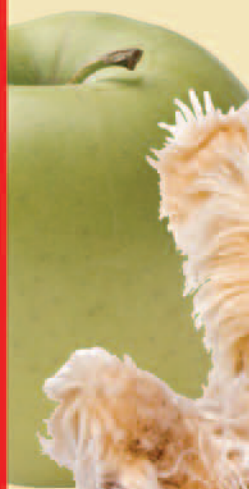


A Lucky Duck Book



Storytelling in the Classroom

Enhancing Traditional Oral Skills for Teachers and Pupils



Age range 5-11

Printable worksheets

Alison Davies

Storytelling in the Classroom

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Enhancing Oral and Traditional Skills
for Teachers

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Paul Chapman
Publishing

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First published 2007

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Paul Chapman Publishing
A SAGE Publications Company
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B1/11 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
Post Bag 7,
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
33 Pekin Street # 2-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

www.luckyduck.co.uk

Commissioning editors: Barbara Maines and George Robinson
Illustrator: Philippa Drakeford

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4129 2025 4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2006904349

Typeset by Pantek Arts Ltd, Maidstone, Kent
Printed on paper from sustainable forests
Printed in Great Britain by Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

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Part One Techniques for Teachers

1 Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time there was storytelling. It's hard to pin-point exactly when it started, although I would guess that when man first began to communicate he used stories. Cave paintings of that age are not isolated doodles or pictures etched in stone for amusement; they are tales describing actual events, things that happened at that time. As vocabulary developed so did stories, and perhaps that's why we created such a rich language, so that it could be used instinctively to create tales, to make sense of the world and who we are. Stories are an inherent part of communication. They are essential for survival on many levels. Stop for a moment. Listen. You will hear snippets of conversation, dialogue passing from one person to another. The most common thing you will hear is the recounting of tales. It's what we do on a daily basis. In some cases it's a means of passing on necessary information; but we also use stories as a way of sharing, of explaining who we are to others and forming bonds within society. We use stories to educate, to offer wisdom and knowledge to those less experienced. We are storytellers every day whether we realise it or not and it is a skill that can be developed and used in education with exceptional results.

Records of storytelling have been found in many ancient cultures and languages, including Sanskrit, Old German, Latin, Chinese, Greek, Icelandic and Old Slavonic. The Celtic bards of old used storytelling as a way of making sense of their origins, a way to build a common history. They would chronicle events through poetic narrations, epic tales that are preserved to this day in folklore and legend. Coming from Nottingham, I would cite Robin Hood as the perfect example of this. Medieval literature has many examples of bardic tales and poetry recounting the adventures of Robin and his Merry Men. Is it true? Who knows, but it highlights the potency of such storytelling. In her wonderful analysis of the history of storytelling Anne Pellowski suggests that the oral tradition has its origins in play, with gifted but ordinary folk entertaining their social group. She

researched this further and came to the following conclusions, which illustrate the importance of storytelling and how it has evolved throughout history:

1. Storytelling grew from the playful elements of human nature and satisfied a need for self-entertainment. We are gifted with an imagination; we can create something out of nothing. Children do this automatically through imaginary friends and worlds.
2. It fulfilled a need to explain surroundings; the physical world. As humans we are logical creatures, we need to make sense of things, to find the rhyme and reason behind evolution.
3. It evolved through the intrinsic urge to communicate and share experiences. Part of being human is the desire to form bonds, family units etc.
4. It developed as a means of explaining and substantiating the supernatural forces believed to be present in the world at that time, thus satisfying religious beliefs. Again this is partly linked to our need to make some sort of sense of things, even if they appear beyond our understanding.
5. It fulfilled an aesthetic need for beauty, regularity and form through expressive language and music.
6. It was born from a need to record history, to chronicle the deeds of ancestors and in so doing keep them alive for years to come.

It is understandable that this medium of communication is so successful and important, but what exactly are we talking about here? What is storytelling? There are many different definitions and opinions; this is because as an art form it is hard to define. How can you classify something that is flexible, the parameters are always shifting? Anne Pellowski attempts to explain it in her book:

‘the art or craft of narration of stories in verse/and or prose, as performed or led by one person before a live audience; the stories narrated may be spoken, chanted, or sung, with or without musical, pictorial, and/or other accompaniment and may be learned from oral, printed or mechanically recorded sources; one of its purposes may be that of entertainment’. (Pellowski, 1991, p. 15)

I like to think of storytelling as a way of lifting words from a page and breathing life into them. I collect stories in my head; most of the time they are original. I like to create new tales and sometimes I write them down, sometimes I don't. As a storyteller I have developed ways of recording my tales visually, in my mind's eye. It's nice to get away from the constraints of the written word – not that there isn't a place for that, there is. I enjoy writing and I think it has immense value, in fact in some cases storytelling has actually helped with my written work. But storytelling allows me to escape the confines of the page. I can add colour and texture to my words and make them flexible. It doesn't matter where I take the tale, because I am the only one that knows it; I am the captain, and the ship is my story. I am taking the audience on a journey. I move through the story, changing pace and style. In essence I am free to do what I want, when I want. I can take the plot in a different direction; I can develop the characters and give them room to grow. If I choose I can use my stories to deliver a particular message, to pass on wisdom and entertain. I can tell the same story ten times and every single time it will be different depending on what I want to focus on. Storytelling is the best tonic for the imagination, and as such children find it exciting and fun. They have permission to go wherever they want, to explore language and learn about life in a safe environment. They immediately connect with the storyteller; there is no book or paper to act as a barrier. The only pictures they have are in their heads. The words become their own.

The difference between storytelling and reading might be a clear one, but why is it so important in the classroom? Here are some reasons why storytelling is essential for educational development and can be used to complement the curriculum:

- Storytelling aids in the development of children's ability to interpret and understand events beyond their immediate experience. Children's perception changes as they 'make it real' and identify with the story on a personal level. They are able to do this in a positive and safe environment. Moral tales are particularly good learning tools as they immerse children in situations where they can learn a lesson; they then discover the truth in their own way.
- Storytelling is a medium of shared experiences. This helps children to empathise with the characters, to feel elated at another's joy, sad for their misfortunes. It is a tool for social and interpersonal development.

- Storytelling aids language development. Children need to be exposed to language to fully understand its implications. This will also have a beneficial effect on reading skills and being able to associate meanings and emotions with words.
- Storytelling helps with listening and speaking skills. Children will learn the importance of listening, of how to communicate ideas and interact with others. They will develop their vocabulary and learn when and where to use words and phrases.
- Storytelling stretches the imagination. It encourages children to escape into a fantasy world, and supports their daydreams, which has positive benefits on mental health and clarity leaving them better able to cope with day-to-day situations (fairy tales are ideally suited for this purpose).
- Storytelling entertains and excites, which is an important part of learning. If children are having fun they are involved, and motivated to learn more. There is nothing more rewarding than watching a class light up with enthusiasm as they engage with your story, and everything falls into place. You can almost see them working through the logical process, anticipating what comes next and discovering the real meaning of the tale.
- Storytelling can be used across the curriculum to break down subjects that are difficult to learn. It can be used to make problem areas more accessible, by adopting a creative attitude and coming at the subject from a different angle. Think how much more appealing it is to say 'Today I'm going to tell you a story about a girl and her mathematical friend,' rather than 'Today we're going to look at data handling and how we can use it as a tool in mathematics.' The first sentence sounds intriguing; immediately questions begin to form in the mind – What girl? Who is her mathematical friend? What happens to them? The second sentence might be informative but it doesn't encourage questions. It is a statement of fact and therefore harder for the children to relate to.
- Storytelling helps children appreciate different cultures, in addition to helping them examine and value their own personal heritage. For example, I use a Navajo Indian story about Quillwork Girl and her seven brothers who flee the Great Buffalo spirit and end up as stars in

the night sky. It's a beautiful story that not only illustrates how the Native Americans lived, their traditions and habits, but also their spirituality. They use their stories as a way of communicating their beliefs.

- Storytelling is the natural way to introduce children to the wonderful world of books and reading. It's a good idea to have plenty of reading material available so that the class can do follow up work, and read stories similar to the ones you have been telling. The next stage is for the class to create their own stories and learn how to communicate their ideas individually and in groups.

There's a story I tell in schools called 'The King's Cloak'. This story was handed down to me by another storyteller and a close friend. It's one of the first stories I used in the classroom and it works with any age group every time. This is because not only is it an excellent tale that allows the class to get involved in the telling, it is the perfect introduction to explaining what storytelling is.

When I first heard the bare bones of this tale the ending was different. I took the liberty of changing it for the purpose of storytelling in the classroom, and, as I will explain in future chapters, it is part of the role of the storyteller to develop and change tales that are not necessarily originated personally and find a unique voice.

The King's Tailor is the central character. The story follows events as the Tailor continues to make items of clothing for the King from the same piece of material (a smelly old kitchen rag). The King is very precious about his clothes and incredibly vain (this is what makes the tale amusing). Each time the Tailor makes something he convinces the King that it is something special, so the King wears it over and over, until he wears it out. The Tailor then has to make something new (I get the class to interject with things they think he might make for the King). As the story goes on the items of clothing get smaller and smaller until eventually the Tailor is left with a couple of ragged threads. The question then is what can the tailor create now? The answer is the crux of the story. He takes the threads and weaves them into his hair, and from that day forwards he leaves the palace and spends his life wandering from kingdom to kingdom. He makes a living not by weaving clothes, but by weaving tales, wonderful, colourful yarns that people remember, and his

favourite tale is that of the King's Cloak. This illustrates the concept of handing down tales, of using them to pass on information and to record history. I could explain this to the class, but I prefer to show rather than tell; the children then come to an understanding by connecting with the tale, and that, in essence, is what storytelling is all about.

How to use this book

In the following chapters you will find information on storytelling, getting started as a storyteller and how to implement this ancient oral tradition in the classroom. This book is a practical guide with tips for teachers on developing storytelling skills with the intention of running activities in class. It is aimed at teachers of pupils of all ages (although the nature of storytelling seems to appeal best to those at primary level). There are lesson plans and ideas that can be incorporated at any phase of the curriculum. The activities vary and it is quite possible to mix and match these ideas to suit the age and needs of your particular class. Storytelling is a flexible tool, and should be used as such, so take the bits you think will work for you and modify them. Happy storytelling!