

Classroom Tales

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The main focus of this project was storytelling as a classroom tool for teaching language arts in the elementary grades. I wanted to learn to tell several stories and then develop plans which could be used in future teaching experiences. The activities in these plans are built around the theme of each story, integrating language arts instruction. To begin, I gathered resources which have been compiled into a bibliography(see Appendix A). The resources listed provide a good starting point for the beginning storyteller. Next, I selected several stories and learned to tell them. In the process of doing this I researched storytelling techniques and developed a list of "Important Points to Remember..."(see Appendix A). Also, in selecting four stories to tell I found at least 40 other stories I'd like to learn. Therefore, I started a card file of these stories which I will continue to add to and draw from in the future.

As I was learning these stories, I also began building activities around each of the stories to be used in future teaching experiences. I developed a box of storytelling props which will be used to tell several stories presently and others in the future.

Two final aspects of this project involved sharing what I discovered with two distinctly different groups of people. On April 20th I gave a "How to Get Started in Storytelling" workshop to Dr. Nancy Clements' EDRDG 430 class. In this workshop I used the "Important Points to Remember..." handout and the "Bibliography of Resources" as a basis for the workshop. I also shared what I have learned about the value of storytelling as a teaching tool. On April 24th, I gave two 30 minute storytelling presentations at Mitchell Elementary School in Muncie. The first presentation was to a group of 45 second graders. The second presentation was to a group of 45 fourth

graders. Both groups were great audiences and seemed to enjoy the presentations.

Through these experiences I accomplished my goal for the project which was to learn enough about storytelling so that I can use it as a teaching tool as well as continue to explore it creatively outside the classroom.

RATIONALE

I chose storytelling as the topic for my creative project because I love literature. I simply wanted to explore another way to connect people with ideas -- to motivate children to find meaning through literature. It was not my goal to become a professional storyteller. Rather, I needed the opportunity to explore the creative process of storytelling and its role in the classroom. Storytelling is an excellent springboard for teaching language arts and for the writing process approach to teaching writing. Children need to learn to communicate effectively today more than ever before. Through storytelling, children learn listening, speaking, reading and writing in a meaningful way. Oral language skills are improved as children are exposed to the unique patterns of language used by storytellers. When listening, children must visualize and interpret stories from the words alone. They must think independently, creatively using their imaginations. Storytelling is one way in which a child can learn to preserve and appreciate his native culture and heritage as well as learn to respect other cultures. More importantly, storytelling is a sharing experience --a personal exchange and cooperative effort of teller and listener in the search for meaning.

REACTION TO THE EXPERIENCE

When you tell a story, you give a gift of yourself. It is a very personal, creative experience. It is a two way communication between listener and teller in which both parties must be involved in order for meaning to be developed. In a curriculum that is packed so tightly with shoulds, oughts and musts there is little room left for choice or creativity. Even the electives for elementary education majors are "directed". I have no doubt that I will be well prepared to teach elementary school upon graduation. I would like to see more flexibility in the curriculum. I am certainly thrilled to have participated in the Honors Program and to have had the chance to spend a semester exploring a topic that I selected simply because I wanted to explore it. This project has caused me to think about many things both related to teaching and not.

It was a pleasant surprise to find so many good resources for storytelling. In addition to at least 20 good books, I discovered the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetration of Storytelling. NAPPS is a "...not-for-profit organization dedicated to encouraging a greater appreciation, understanding and practice of storytelling." This group publishes and distributes a variety of resources, sponsors workshops, and hosts the annual National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee. I wrote for free information and ended up joining the association because the resources are so good.

Another pleasant surprise was the "Tell Me A Story" Celebration Storytelling Competition which is a contest co-sponsored by IBM and Good Housekeeping Magazine. This competition encourages schools to have their own storytelling festivals. Students entering the competition must create

their own story based on personal experience and/or family history. The winning students (from each age group) and their teachers are invited to attend the National Storytelling Festival to share their stories in the fall. The materials I received include a curriculum guide, a recording of four stories told by professional storytellers and a program guide for planning a storytelling festival for the school---all absolutely free of charge! This would be a fantastic way to build self esteem and positive home school relations. The curriculum guide supports both the whole language approach and the writing process approach. I plan to use these materials during student teaching if at all possible. I probably would not enter the competition until I have my own group of children to work with. Nonetheless, this type of unit would really be exciting to try.

As for the two presentations that I made, I am pleased with the outcome of both of them. I was somewhat apprehensive about both presentations but thoroughly enjoyed both of them once they started. Before I made the presentation to the EDRDG 430 class, I was asked to present a workshop at the 17th Annual Early Childhood Education Conference next spring. Now, I think storytelling will be my topic. --To think that I have a year to prepare! What a luxury!

Telling the stories to the children at Mitchell was a great experience. It was interesting to tell the stories to two groups at different ages one right after the other. The second graders seemed much more interested in the shorter stories and in the stories with props. In the future I would like to try telling stories to a smaller group of children at this age and younger. Gathering them around on a rug in a storytelling corner would be ideal. The fourth graders were much more responsive to the longer, more adventurous stories and weren't bothered by being in a larger group. I think they would have loved

the "Aschenputtel" (the German version of Cinderella) had there been time to share that story with them.

Fairytales are really difficult to learn, as I discovered when trying to learn "Aschenputtel". It is so hard to preserve the flavor of the language which makes the tales so special. Folktales, fables, and tales from experience are much better tales to start with. I haven't given up on "Aschenputtel". I will come back to it and try it again in the future. Storytelling is not an exercise in memorization and the only "right" way to tell a story is from the heart.

This experience has opened so many possibilities for me. As I worked on this project I found that the more I learned, the more I wanted to investigate further. The process made me think about more things than I could ever describe here. I do think I should start keeping a journal. Who knows? Maybe someday I will write a book. For now, I am happy with having the chance to scratch the surface of a topic that I will continue to study in the future.

On Storytelling...

The following quotations are taken from The Way of the Storyteller by Ruth Sawyer.

"It is an art demanding the utmost of your capacity and mine for living and understanding; it asks for integrity, trust and vision.

There must inevitably be a highly individual approach to each story. Creative imagination reaches for new material in diversified ways. It grasps it, makes it over, each time differently. Herein lies the living quality of it, that it is never the same, never repetitive.

No one questions the vivid effect a story well told can have on the imagination of a child. Without purpose or effort young minds will be led out, stimulated, winged by the sharing of stories aloud, and to a far greater degree than when alone and to oneself. But I hold with Sir Walter Scott, who warned a hundred and fifty years ago against putting a child's mind into the stocks, making it rigid, inflexible, by submitting to it only prescribed material. The whole process of growing up is the process of reaching out avidly for the world, to gain experience, to learn, to evaluate."(p.33-36)

Appendix

Important Points to Remember...

When Selecting Stories

- Consider the characteristics of your audience.
- Will the story appeal to a range of listeners?
- Read the story aloud several times. Are you comfortable with it? Does it flow?
- Does the tone and style of the story fit with your personality?
- Choose a story that you really like.

When Preparing Stories

- Read it several times until you are very familiar with it.
- Think about the characters, action, imagery etc... Analyze the story for aspects that you want to convey to your audience.
- Read and re-read the story. Try to visualize the sequence of events in the story one at a time.
- Make cue cards.
- Do not memorize the story word for word. Only memorize key lines or expressions.
- Rehearse the story. Some people prefer using tape recorders or mirrors. Do what works best for you. Practice the story on a friend.

When Telling Stories

- Maintain eye contact.
- Be aware of your voice (rate and volume especially).
- Use voice to draw your audience in.
- Introduction and conclusion are very important--slow down.
- Use gestures naturally.

Anne Pellowski suggests three basic rules in The Family Storytelling Handbook:

- “1. Be natural.
2. Don't exaggerate unless the natural purpose of the story is silly or nonsensical entertainment.
3. Believe in the story that you are telling, either literally or symbolically or both.”
(page, 52).

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P.O. Box 309
Jonesboro, TN 37659

Story: "Nothing But Trouble"

Source: The Story Vine, by Anne Pellowski

Prop: set of six "trouble dolls" from Guatemala

Telling Time: 4-6 minutes

Theme: feelings and how to deal with them

Literature:

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendack

A Baby Sister For Frances by Russell Hoban

Activities:

1) Children dramatize/role play own version of "Nothing But Trouble" inserting their own troubles or worries in place of the characters'. Select one person to be the curandera (healing woman--listener). Listener holds the box of dolls and puts it away when worries have been acted out and dolls placed inside. How does talking and listening help us deal with our worries ?

2) Children can draw pictures of anger, fright and/or unhappiness. Discuss emotions and how to deal with them in small groups or as a class. Role play emotions and constructive outlets for emotions as a class.

3) Compare and contrast the feelings, problems and solutions of the main characters in related literature.

4) Make puppets of favorite characters for use in storytelling center. Puppets from Where the Wild Things Are would be especially interesting.

5) Brainstorm words that describe anger, fright, unhappiness or other negative feelings. Brainstorm words that describe happiness, security, comfort or other positive feelings. Write each word on a card. Put positive words in one box and negative words in another box. Children can use words from these boxes as they write stories of their own.

6) Ideas for writing:

What makes you angry, frightened or unhappy ?

What makes you happy, secure, or comfortable ?

When you feel this way, what do you do ?

Have you ever had a day like the one Alexander described ?

Story: "The Rabbit Story"

Source: The Family Storytelling Handbook by Anne Pellowski

Prop: one large handkerchief

Telling Time: 2 minutes

Theme: rabbits

Literature:

The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown

The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter

Activities:

1) Have a class pet and build a unit around this experience. Children can share the responsibility for the care of the class rabbit. Name the rabbit. Children can write or dictate (LEA) stories about their experiences with and observations of the rabbit. Older (or more advanced) children can do research in the library to find out more about different types of rabbits, habitats, care etc...and then report back to the class.

2) Work with fantasy/reality by comparing the class pet to the rabbits in related literature.

3) Ideas for writing:

Write a sequel to The Tale of Peter Rabbit or The Runaway Bunny. What happened when Peter woke up the next morning? What else could Little Bunny become?

Write a story about the handkerchief rabbit. Did the rabbit stay in your pocket or did he continue his adventure? Where did he decide to go? Why?

4) Leave handkerchiefs in storytelling center and encourage children to tell their own rabbit stories in pairs or small groups.

5) Listen to recordings of "Brer Rabbit Stories" told by Jackie Torrence (available on cassette through NAPPS). Guide children to visualize the sequence of the stories by asking questions similar to those listed for "Aschenputtel". Discuss what each children saw in their minds emphasizing that it is alright for each person to see something different.

Also discuss the difference in dialect/language used by the storyteller on tape. How does this help us imagine the story more clearly?

Story: "How the Chipmunk Got His Stripes"

Source: Stories for the Campfire, edited by Hanson and Roemich

Prop: -----

Telling Time: 7-8 minutes

Theme: "How?" and "Why?" our magnificent made up explanations for everyday events --- fantasy vs. reality

Literature:

Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears by Verna Ardema

"Why the Parrot Repeats Man's Words"

"Why the Sun and the Moon Live in the Sky"

"How Frog Lost His Tail"

---all three found in Best Loved Folktales of the World

Activities:

1)Children choose their own animal and write "pourquoi tales". Publish class booklet and make it available as a choice for sustained silent reading time.

2)Listen to recording of Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears and/or make recordings of the children retelling the story and acting out the animal noises.

3)Guide the children to visualize the exaggeration of the mischievous chipmunk as the story is retold.

4)Compare and contrast pourquoi tales to some other tall tales that aren't necessarily pourquoi tales -- Johnny Appleseed, Davy Crockett, and Paul Bunyan are characters which would be interesting to compare. Children could write and publish a class book of tall tales to be kept with the book of pourquoi tales for sustained silent reading time.

Story: "Aschenputtel" (German version of Cinderella)

Source: The Best Loved Folktales of the World, edited by Joanna Cole

Props: -----

Telling Time: 15-20 minutes

Note: This is a lovely story but it is very difficult to learn to tell well. It is long and the translation is difficult. The language is beautiful and would be excellent for extending vocabulary if preserved in the telling. This is hard to do even for the experienced storyteller. The story could be recorded onto a cassette tape and used in a listening corner. More advanced students in grades 5 and 6 might be interested in reading the story.

Theme: "Cinderella" in different cultures

Literature:

"Cinderella"--(familiar French version)

"The Indian Cinderella"--(a Canadian Indian version)

both found in Best Loved Folktales of the World

picturebook versions--illustrators Paul Galdone and Marcia Brown are especially good

Activities:

1) Compare and contrast in discussion various aspects of these tales after listening to all three. (characters, setting, outcome/ending, tone, imagery etc...)

2) Ideas for writing:

Pretend that you are Cinderella in France and write a letter to Aschenputtel in Germany.

Rewrite the story and change one of the characters. What would happen if the stepmother wasn't wicked? or if the stepsisters were stepbrothers? or if the fairy god mother was unreliable/always late. How would this change the plot?

3) Guide children to visualize the events and details of the story in their minds as they listen to it again. Use questions like: What does Aschenputtel look like in your imagination? How tall is the Prince? his horse? Close your eyes and imagine him standing beside something and tell us what you see. Children can also be encouraged to think of the story's sequence in terms of frames on a filmstrip and then verbalize what they have seen.