

A Storyteller's Approach to Teaching Literature and History

A Jim Weiss Workshop

ABOUT STORYTELLING

Being a good listener is among the most essential skills we can teach to children – and adults. Listening is vital for solving problems, communicating, and being a good citizen, professional, friend and family member. Storytelling provides a rich model of oral language, offering an exciting, entertaining channel for developing auditory skills, interpersonal communication and appreciation of the spoken word. Studies also prove that reading and listening to stories vastly increases ones ability to understand, and empathize with, others.

USE STORYTELLING TO:

- *Teach the facts, subject matter, and information * Inspire interest in varied subjects
- *Explore values and human motives * Entertain
- *Foster clarity and organization of thought * Develop auditory and listening skills
- *Build concentration * Encourage self-expression and creativity
- *Relax and calm * Improve memorization capabilities
- *Build confidence in oral communication * Encourage the reading of fine literature/ history
- *Build lasting bonds between the teller and the listeners, and community among the listeners

SETTING THE SCENE

Storytelling is a personal experience. Dim the lights for effect, re-arrange the chairs, use props like a talking stick or magic circle to show this is a special time. Emphasize that there are times to take in and times to put out and storytelling provides the opportunity for both. Interruptions obstruct the flow of the story but sometimes a fire truck passing by or a school bell ringing can be spontaneously incorporated into the story and serve as a great example of ad-lib.

THREE GREAT SECRETS

- The Story must sing TO the teller before it can sing THROUGH the teller.* -Weiss
- The audience wants you to succeed. They are on your side.
- PLAY! No matter how dramatic the story, or how much you want to convey it, remember to have fun.

TYPES OF STORIES TO TELL:

Adventure Stories	Dreams	Epics	Allegories	International Tales
Allegories	Fables	Ballads	Legends	Animal Stories
Biographical Stories	Fairytales	Fantasy	Myths	Bible Stories
Family Stories	Mysteries	Parables	Proverbs	Puppet Stories
Ghost Stories	Folktales	Hero Tales	Tall Tales	Holiday Stories
Visualizations	Tall Tales	Heroine Tales		
Biographical Stories	Local History and Legends	Literary Stories		
Episodic Stories	Creation Stories	Personal Experiences		
Growing Up Stories	Sign Language Stories	Songs that Tell Stories		
Poetic Stories	How and Why Stories (Also known as "Pourquoi" Tales)			

THE STORY

Whether your stories are fiction or non-fiction, they need a “storyline” with a beginning, middle and end. This is especially true for history stories. Sometimes there is a prequel, and frequently the “end” leads inevitably to a sequel. When there is a conflict, there may be more than two sides or perspectives. A major goal in using stories is to generate reflective thought and new ideas from students. Showcasing an array of possibilities and options, and recognizing how to resolve problems and make informed choices, gives students the chance to develop their own decision-making skills.

THE OUTLOOK OF THE STORY PERTAINING TO VALUES

With both fictional characters and historical figures, we need to identify with the thoughts, feelings, challenges and values of the time. It can be difficult to remove oneself from a contemporary perspective, imagining times without cell phones, computers, e-mail, modern medicines, etc. When studying history, it is necessary to remind ourselves of what the people had to work with, and of what was NOT available to them. This is an excellent way to bring critical thinking into the lesson.

Some stories have clear meanings. Aesop’s fables, certain religious parables, Zen stories or Native-American teaching tales are good examples. In these, one has the option of stating the moral, as is often done in fables, or of having a character state it. When I tell “The Tortoise and the Hare,” I have the tortoise tell the hare, “Slow and steady wins the race.” In other stories, the moral is there but may be less explicitly stated. For example, one can tell Greek Myths as grand sagas, straightforward adventures, comic folktales, or as a mixture thereof; but always, they offer an opportunity to learn from the character’s choices. For example, when I tell a Hercules adventure, I point out that Hercules knows that everyone is given some special gift or talent. Yet, he unwisely misuses his own gift of strength, causing pain to himself and others. His adventures constitute a learning process that brings the wisdom he needs in order to use his gift positively, live harmoniously and contribute to the world. I present this element of the myth, but stop short of announcing “the moral is” as in an Aesop-like statement.

LOOK FOR THE HOOK

Within any story, fiction or non-fiction, there lies a "hook," a moment or situation that draws in the reader/listener. The hook can be narrative ("This is the story of a woman who ate a dragon...") or come from the character ("Waiting for the battle to begin, Alexander thought, 'How on earth did I reach this point?'"

Opening with a question ("Did you ever...?") or a mystery works well ("Sir Charles died from a heart attack," said the doctor. "But I've come to believe that the cause of that attack may have been a terrifying vision.")

THE SETTING: WHAT ELSE WAS GOING ON AT THE TIME?

History is a “Story” and not simply data to be examined, memorized or looked at in isolation from the circumstances, mores and customs of the time. This concept is especially transparent with Bible stories, or with ethical issues such as slavery, or how World War I influenced the Holocaust in World War II. History also provides explanations and a way to evaluate progress. Finally, knowledge of history can create strong bonds of understanding and affection between generations as stories clarify similarities and differentiate eras.

WHO’S TELLING THIS STORY?

Historians record history-but how does one insure accuracy without bias on the part of those who record it? How we view history can be influenced by who is doing the telling (i.e. “history is written by the winners.”) Students may not realize that finding something on a website does not necessarily make it true, since almost anyone can launch a website. Even fundamental details such as names and dates may vary from source to source. An interesting exercise is to write about an event or person from different perspectives. For example, write a diary entry about Thomas Jefferson from the perspective of a slave, King George III, or Jefferson’s grandchild.

ASK QUESTIONS!

Where and when did the character live? How might this have shaped that person? * How did the character change throughout different stages of the story? Did s/he progress? * What is the most essential lesson the character had to learn? * What major actions did the character take? Why? How could different actions have altered the outcome/history forever? What else could s/he have done? * Can you relate an experience of your own that might be likened to this character’s experiences? * What values/virtues are present in this story?

ESTABLISHING THE CHARACTER

The Character's traits and skills drive the story and set its tone. This also dictates the nature of his/her speaking voice. Who is this character? What delineates him/her from the other characters? Picture her/him and ask how s/he should sound.

YOUR VOCAL PALETTE: CREATING VOICES BRINGS CHARACTERS TO LIFE

Pace	Fast vs. Slow
Pitch	High vs. Low
Volume	Loud vs. Soft
Evenness	Jumpy or Abrupt vs. Even or Drawn Out
Texture	Rough or Gravelly vs. Smooth or Clear
Accents	Use these to portray, never to mock

You needn't create exact vocal portraits. Even small distinctions can indicate character traits and help listeners differentiate between characters.

Jim Weiss' Recipe for a Story

Beginning *(where we meet main characters and prepare for the main events)*

- Introduce the main character(s) and indicate what is distinctive about him/her/them. The person's nature shapes the course of the story by determining how he/she addresses challenges and choices.
(Examples: Samson's strength; the Tortoise's determination and the Hare's arrogance)
- Where and when does the story occur? We can state it or simply give clues.
- Who tells us the story: an omniscient narrator, one character, alternating characters?
- What starts the journey? What pushes the character(s) into the action?

Middle *(in which most action and character development occur)*

- The main character confronts challenges or choices. In fiction, these challenges grow more difficult or meaningful.
- The helper: someone offers information or tools to help the main character
- The character has opportunities to learn and grow from these challenges.
- The Turning Point: the character turns to face the culminating challenge.

End *(in which we see the outcome and learn any lessons)*

- The Moment of "Aha!" occurs when the character actively confronts the challenge and we learn if he/she achieves his/her goals for a happy, unhappy, or partially happy ending
- Outcome/Resolution: how does the character's situation change afterward?
- Lesson or Moral: this can be clearly stated or merely implied.

APPLYING STORYTELLING SKILLS TO READING ALOUD

The mere presence of a book can be very comforting to an audience of young listeners. Seeing an adult lovingly handle and read a book can have a soothing, magical effect and serves as an unspoken endorsement of reading. This is a sure way to help build a new generation of book readers.

Many of the tools you bring to “telling” a story also apply when reading aloud. Even if you plan to read the text word for word, you might:

- Read the story ahead of time. Try to fit the story to the audience’s level; anticipate audience questions; add appropriate related activities such as songs, sound effects, finger games, creative dramatics, movement exercises, related visual art projects, etc.
- Stop to ask thoughtful questions, or to briefly clarify a point. Afterward be sure to renew the mood by saying, “Now where were we?” or “Well, let’s see if that is what Jack actually did,” etc.
- Discuss points of special interest *after* the story, rather than breaking the flow. (“That’s a great question. Let’s talk about it after we see what happened to Rapunzel.”)
- Substitute or simplify words or phrases that might be too difficult or verbose for your audience.
- Make the presentation clearer, and more enjoyable, with a variety of character voices (see Page 3-“Your Vocal Palette”). Consider what it is about the character that you wish your listener to know, and how a voice could indicate this quality. Even slight alterations can signal a different character. This also permits you to leave out phrases such as, “asked the queen” once the listeners recognize the voices.

AFTER THE STORY

It is important to encourage students to think critically about the story and its outcome. Ask meaningful questions (“Does this story remind you of something in your own life?” “Was Jack right to steal back the things the giant had stolen from Jack’s family?”) Encourage students to compare and contrast the story’s values, such as kindness vs. selfishness. Present provocative questions (“What would you have done?” “What might this person have done differently, and why?”) As an alternative, go back to a point in the story at which the character had to make a choice, particularly a moral choice, and make up a new ending based upon what s/he might otherwise have done. This is fun, and also teaches that our choices bring varied consequences.

It is important to realize that we need not explicitly examine every story we tell for the lessons it contains. Children who grow up with stories that exemplify positive values become accustomed to working on that level, even when adults in that child’s life do not introduce the subject. These children will begin to ask the right questions themselves about the stories they hear or read, and eventually, they will ask those questions about the actions of those they encounter in their own lives.

Similarly, readers or listeners above a very young age are not well served by painting our heroes or heroines as nearly perfect. One becomes heroic only by overcoming one’s flaws or weaknesses in order to achieve a worthwhile goal, and unrealistically idealized heroes may be beyond our capacity to emulate. The greatest inspirational stories tell of seemingly average people who accept challenges in order to achieve great things.

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