Creating Community through Storytelling

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Outside it's a crisp November evening, dark although it's still early. Inside the school's all-purpose room, however, there's light and energy to spare. Perched excitedly at the edge of their seats are proud family members, teachers, and administrators; a local storyteller; and even a college professor. You can tell this evening is all about the third graders. The children nervously hold hands or put their arms around one another. Finally, the teacher welcomes the guests to the annual storytelling night. She introduces a local storyteller, whom she tells us was there “from the very beginning.” Two students join the teacher and the three of them tell a story, getting the audience—from the principal down to a two-year-old in the back row—to join in on repeated lines and hand gestures. Everyone is ready when the first third grader walks to the front of the room, smiles, and then launches into a tale of “Anansi the Spider.” As each student begins his or her story, classmates lean forward in anticipation. They know one another's stories by heart, yet they are still riveted. Every tale brings the audience into this close community, as they tune out the day’s worries and tune into the ancient art of storytelling.

We have witnessed again and again how, through storytelling, students directly experience the power of narrative, creating meaningful connections with each other and with members of the community—those who are close to them as well as those who represent different cultures and generations. A single storytelling event early in the year connects children with the wider community, and the connections don't stop there. Like a pebble dropped in a pool of water, the effects of that one event ripple outward, creating community through story.

What we have learned is that when children have the opportunity to engage in this kind of storytelling—standing in front of a group, without a book, to share a story they have spent time choosing, learning, and polishing—words come to life and an extraordinary moment is created. As a teacher educator (Tracy), classroom teacher (Heidi), and storyteller and educator (Rosemary), we are constantly in search of such moments. In this article, we consider the potential benefits of storytelling and explore how the yearly third-grade storytelling unit has helped develop the kind of learning community that any teacher (or parent) would want for children, creating a powerful foundation for a lifetime of literacy learning.

Why Storytelling in the Classroom?

As Hamilton and Weiss (2005) tell us:

Storytelling is the oldest form of education. People around the world have always told tales as a way of passing down their cultural beliefs, traditions, and history to future generations. Why? Stories are at the core of all that makes us human. (p. 1)

Despite this significant role in our human lives, it seems that storytelling rarely finds its way into classrooms as official curriculum. Yet, as a natural form of communication, storytelling supports the development of oral language—a foundation for all literacy learning—by strengthening the ability to speak from the imagination. Furthermore, it has the potential to more directly support both reading and writing (Roney, 1989).
Our experience is that children begin to build confidence in their speaking skills as a result of the storytelling unit. In fact, storytelling has been shown to help young children build oral language complexity (Ishell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004), and may be particularly supportive for English language learners. Although we have high expectations for children’s listening and speaking, teachers often provide little in the way of explicit instruction in those areas (Pinnell & Jaggar, 2003). As a result, teachers can mistakenly increase students’ communication apprehension (Holbrook, 1987) and train children to depend on textual cues in order to speak rather than to trust their thinking and natural encoding abilities. This can hinder the effective and confident development of fluent speaking. When students learn to tell stories, they learn to speak for a specific purpose, to carefully attend to an audience, to highlight non-verbal information, to develop effective presentation skills, and to love public speaking.

In order to tell a story, you have to learn a story. As children figure out how to tell stories, they build essential reading skills, such as understanding story elements (character, setting, etc.) and structure (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Storytellers examine the possibilities for sensory imagery and character perspectives; they make decisions about what scenes to include, where to emphasize the humor, how best to use gesture, and so forth (Hamilton & Weiss, 2005). We’ve found that even young children, in the context of storytelling, can grasp these concepts. Engaging in such problem-solving decisions means using comprehension strategies, such as visualizing, inferring, monitoring for understanding, and determining importance (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991) in order to analyze and interpret stories. What could be better for vocabulary learning than reading, understanding, saying, and acting out words so that others will understand them (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006)? And fluency? Reading a story over and over to understand, to interpret, and to decide if you want to learn and tell it is a great opportunity to engage in repeated reading with a purpose (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003).

Often during the storytelling unit of study, family members will relate remembered favorite stories and embrace the sharing of these tales. Children become interested in hearing stories connected to their families and home cultures. Students are also often attracted to telling folktales and other stories from around the world. When stories and the cultures from which they come are approached in a respectful manner—for example, considered authentic and accurate by the people from whom they originate and told in a manner consistent with the community norms—storytelling can be an excellent way for students to discover the narratives of other cultures (Birch & Heckler, 1996; Greene, 1994).

In a way, telling a story is also an act of composing, and there are important continuities between oral and written language (Lindfors, 2008). Davis (2000) has compared the process of learning to write to learning a foreign language, suggesting that if children can tap into their “first language,” their oral, kinesthetic story experience, they will subsequently be more fearless and fluent when they put pen to paper. Preparing a story for a formal telling takes such composition work even further. Children begin to approach the idea of “craft” that we want them to learn as writers (Horn, 2005). For example, our students work on “showing instead of telling,” using a repeated phrase judiciously, or finding the right balance of description versus plot advancement or narrative versus dialogue. What’s more, storytelling makes the concept of audience (often so difficult for young writers) concrete and vital to the success of their literary creations. It is in this captivating process of learning and performing stories that students develop an irresistible love of stories, unencumbered by the work of reading and writing. This love of story is what engenders motivation and satisfaction in the wider literacy learning process.

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**Storytelling as Community Building**

Watching the third graders during storytelling night is enough to convince anyone that these children have become a community of learners. Dyson and Genishi (1994) have written:

> The storytelling self is a social self, who declares and shapes important relationships through the mediating power of words. Thus, in sharing stories, we have the potential for forging new relationships, including local,
classroom “cultures” in which individuals are interconnected and new “we’s” formed. (p. 5)

Listening to oral stories has a similar effect on a classroom as a good read-aloud; it creates a shared experience. Storytelling, though, seems to exert a special power. “One of the central, intuitive tenets of the storytelling movement is that storytelling is a medium of connectivity and of community” (Sobol, Qentile, & Sunwolf, 2004, p. 3). Perhaps it is the action and expression, the interactivity, or the stronger eye contact, but storytelling provides a vitality that can be absent in read-aloud or show-and-tell sessions. With storytelling, rather than the focus being on an external object (a book or prized possession), the focus becomes the speaking-listening relationship.

In her own early childhood classrooms, Paley (2003) creates a community she describes as a “literary network propelled by the need children have to connect themselves to one another through their stories” (p. 14). Such community can be critical to the success of literacy learners. Bloome (1986) notes that, “Since reading and writing are inherently social processes, one way to think about literacy is in terms of community building” (p. 71). The nature of that community and its relationship to literacy will influence who participates and what that participation will look like. Storytelling can be the bridge between community models of literacy and school-based models of literacy, allowing children opportunities to integrate their social and cultural identities with academic identities related to literacy (Bloome, Katz, Solsken, Willett, & Wilson–Keenan, 2000). This closer, immediate, and transactional connection with speaker and audience is what makes storytelling such a valuable part of literacy learning, confidence building, and community creation.

Making a Splash with the First Stone: Bringing the Outside In

Before I (Heidi) begin any unit in my third-grade classroom, I plan a specific event to set the tone for learning and create a spark of excitement. As a colleague once said, “It’s all in the sell job.” The first day of the storytelling unit is my chance to hook the students onto the power of stories in a way that provides a connection to the wider community. They already know about sharing personal stories; beyond that, their storytelling experiences are limited. This year the unit began with a visit from a renowned local storyteller.

Standing on the stage of our auditorium, a man with long dark hair towered over the audience. His hand-crafted drum piqued the children’s interest, as they had just studied the history of local Northwest Coast Salish tribes. While telling a personal story of how he became a Tlingit raven dancer in Alaska, Gene Tagaban slowly transformed. He explained how, as a young boy, he watched the raven dancer of his tribe, thinking, “I’m going to do that one day!” Gene described how he learned the dance by observing his elders. Over his jeans and t-shirt, he put on traditional Tlingit regalia, including hand painted wooden wings spanning several feet past his arms. As his story came to a close, Gene donned an intricately carved mask and performed the raven dance. During a quick scan of the audience, I saw wide eyes and open mouths. They were transfixed. Over the course of his time with us, Gene asked the crowd, “Who here is a storyteller?” At first, most of the students were timid. By the end, he had every person in the room (adults included) slapping their chests and shouting “I’M A STORYTELLER!” All my students were hooked! In this way they began building a literacy identity that includes storytelling (Bloome, 1986; Johnston, 2004).

Another community storyteller, Mrs. Broccoli (a.k.a. Harriet Arkley), is a neighbor of one of my former students. In contrast to Gene Tagaban, Mrs. Broccoli is only slightly taller than my third graders. She wore a colorful sweater depicting characters from favorite stories and carried a large bag full of items to help her with her craft. In the course of an hour, she had the students equally enthralled with familiar stories (“The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly”) and new ones as well (“The Turnip”). Several stories allowed audience involvement, and students participated eagerly. During “Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle,” everyone’s thumbs were up and moving around. Every student wanted to run up and hug her after she told her final story.

By inviting both of these experienced storytellers into our school, I brought the outside world of storytelling to my students’ immediate environment. As we moved into telling stories within the classroom, my main goal was for students to select a story, learn, understand, practice, and finally, perform it. I would act as a mediator of my students’ learning all along the way through modeling and structured mini-lessons (Hamilton & Weiss, 2005). Lucy Calkins has said:
If we want children to know what it is to take in the words and thoughts of another person and to let those words have a lasting mark, then we need to mentor children to become citizens in a listening community. (2001, p. 22)

As my students mastered the art of storytelling, I knew they would create meaningful connections with members of their own community and beyond.

A Ripple: Inside the Classroom

I spent the next few weeks, as I do every year, implementing storytelling instruction. I used Hamilton and Weiss’s (2005) *Children Tell Stories* as a guide. I pre-selected about 40 stories of different reading and interest levels, and students spent time during independent reading narrowing their choices. Once everyone had a story picked out, our activities had one of two focuses: literary elements (story structure, repetition, dialogue, etc.) or oral and physical rehearsal. For example, in one lesson I taught my students how to create a story map of the main events of a story—an especially helpful technique for striving readers. Students took to the authentic use of a graphic organizer, which has been shown to improve comprehension (NRP, 2000). Any time students needed to remember part of their story, they could look back at their pictures of the story rather than searching through the original text. This enabled students to tell stories at higher levels than their own reading levels (a motivating factor for many).

Strengthening Student-Student Bonds

The students took advantage of several opportunities to provide support to each other during this phase of the unit. Each student chose the story he or she wanted to tell. When a student received an outside opinion from friends, it revealed the care students had for each other and how well they knew each others’ strengths. Cindy, for example, narrowed her story list down to three possibilities. Feeling unable to choose, she asked her friend Raquel for advice. The girls picked a place on beanbags in the corner of the room with Cindy’s list in hand. Raquel skimmed through the three short stories and, after careful consideration, held up the “Rat Princess” and whispered something to Cindy. They both smiled and Cindy ran up to me, her chosen script in hand. “Raquel helped me pick this. It has animals and it has a PATTERN so I’ll remember it!” Raquel knew enough about Cindy to know that she would benefit from a story with a recurring theme. Cindy most likely took that advice because she trusted her as a friend. I was encouraged to see a direct application of a lesson on story patterns I had given earlier that week.

We had countless opportunities for students to try out their stories on a safe classroom audience. Our storytelling practice sessions started out very manageable—students told their story to a partner (or even the wall!). To build confidence, students added one performance element at a time: words, vocal and facial expression, actions, etc. As their comfort levels increased, students would tell their stories to more members of the class. Theater games and performance activities served to increase their boldness in experimenting with their voices and bodies. For example, acting out the story without words did wonders for bringing out animated movements and gestures.

During many of my mini-lessons, I focused on how to support a storyteller. I recognized the importance of giving specific feedback, whether it was in storytelling, reading, or writing (Underwood & Tregidgo, 2006). This did not come naturally to every student, and I used a gradual release of responsibility model to support their learning (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). I first demonstrated how to coach a storyteller and provided clear guidelines (Hamilton & Weiss, 2005, p. 136). One of the rules is to give feedback on what the teller did well before making suggestions for improvement. Peer coaches must also thoughtfully suggest specific things for the storyteller to try differently. I knew this would only be effective for the students if they had become comfortable enough (and practiced enough) with each other to accept and to give constructive criticism.

My observations during practice revealed two ways that students were supporting each other. First, students were increasingly recognizing each others’ strengths and areas for improvement. Students began by simply clapping and yelling “great!” when someone finished a story. While their encouragement was nice, tellers soon realized they needed more specific advice and began using more coaching language with each other. One example occurred when Mikal told his story “Wind and Sun” to three classmates. When he finished, Anna said, “I know that story ‘cause you’ve told it..."
a lot, but your voice is too quiet and I think people might understand it better if you talked a little louder.” Mikal’s group came up with a phrase—“Shout it to the mountain tops!”—to remind him. Mikal loved it, and we used the phrase for the rest of the year for anyone whose voice wasn’t being heard. “Great” wasn’t a complete sentence by the end of our practice sessions. Walking around the room, I frequently overheard comments such as “your arm gestures really worked,” or “I really liked the voice you gave to the giant.”

The second way that students learned to show support was in their nonverbal feedback—nods, smiles, gasps, eye contact, and facial mirroring. Sometimes a teller would ask his partners to join in with a phrase or an action. The more the other children looked like they were enjoying themselves, the more the teller put into the story. I took this as a cue to go deeper with my instruction; I challenged them to add their own unique flair to their stories to have fun with the audience. During the next few lessons, I modeled several ways to involve the audience. For example, if there is a word that repeats often in a story, the teller can teach the audience how to say the word with her in an interesting way, or perhaps teach them a movement (waving, stomping, etc.) to do when they hear that word spoken. Several students were excited to add these participation elements.

By the end of our unit, my students demonstrated that they knew each other well enough to provide effective support for each other’s learning.

**Strengthening Student-Teacher Bonds**

If I am going to expect that a group of nine-year-olds will learn how to perform a story (a scary thought for us introverts), I feel the need to do it, too; not only to use modeling as an effective teaching strategy (Rosenshine, 1986), but so that my students will see me as a contributing part of our classroom community. Oral communication is, after all, an observed skill acquired through imitation in the context of community (Freeman & Freeman, 2004). I have found that I strengthen my bonds with the students at the same time they are developing their supportive relationships with each other. I am not a public speaker at heart, so students easily pick out areas for improvement when I make it clear that I expect helpful feedback. Like Gene Tagaban’s initial message, I want to show that we are all storytellers. I didn’t quite know how much I had become “part of the group” until one day another teacher came into our classroom and had trouble finding me. She asked a nearby student where the teacher was, and he had to search until he found me with a small group, deeply involved in a practice session.

By about three weeks into our practice sessions, the students (with me in tow) had transformed into a supportive group of storytellers. They knew their stories and they knew each other’s stories. They knew how to encourage each other and accept feedback given to them. They had formed an effective community within the classroom, and they were ready to move on, knowing that storytelling is about sharing their stories with others.

**Ripples Continue: Opening Up and Reaching Out**

Once my students had enough time building their skills and sharing their stories within the walls of our classroom, they were ready to enlist the help of people in a wider network. We found that network in other students at our school, and in the students’ own families. The goal at this point was to continue practicing their stories with wider audiences.

**Family Involvement**

The first “outside” audience was the students’ families. Each week, we had a theme on which to focus our storytelling practice. Themes included body language, character voices, adding details, and inviting audience participation. I wanted to include an at-home connection since parental involvement has been clearly linked to student achievement (Walters, 1997). On Monday of each week, I sent a note home explaining the theme for the week and suggesting how families could work with their third grader. Some families read the story aloud several times so that their child could concentrate on making a “mental movie.” Others held a
“Family Storytelling Night” each week during which everyone had a chance to practice telling stories. Others had just enough time to listen to their child run through her story in the car between errands. It was clear that families appreciated and valued their opportunity to share in the learning process. One morning, a student’s mother came rushing into the classroom before school started. “I just had to tell you!” she said. “Luke’s sister came home early from her friend’s house to help Luke with his story. It was so fun!” Another mother told me that weekly storytelling was the first homework that both she and her son enjoyed. By involving the students’ families at this stage of storytelling, the students’ stories were being refined and developed with the help of the learning communities they had at home.

School Involvement

Students also dipped into the wider school network to share their stories. When they were ready for larger audiences, they invited students in other grades to come and listen. Younger students particularly enjoyed the chance to join in with the stories that allowed audience participation. I loved seeing the excitement and anticipation on the faces of the third graders when they were up front, commanding their audiences. It was gratifying to see unplanned opportunities arise for the children to share their stories as well. Recess tellings were frequent. My favorite example of the impromptu sessions happened during a storm, when all the students ended up in the multipurpose room just before the power went out. The teachers looked desperately at each other. Just as I gathered the courage to lead a song, a student tugged on my sleeve and suggested he try out his story on the whole school. When he was done, another student followed. Everyone sat in that room for half an hour, sharing in the stories. I couldn’t help but thinking how far the third graders had come since they sat and listened to our community storytellers, Gene and Harriet, tell their stories. A month earlier, some students got nervous sharing an answer during class time. Now through their own initiation, they were standing in front of the whole elementary school waving their arms and inviting their listeners into their stories.

It was at that moment that I knew my students were ready for storytelling night. I have never made performing at storytelling night a requirement, in an effort to make the event as stress-free as possible. I ask that all the students come, and they are welcome to watch if they don’t want to tell their story. This year, as with other years, the students responded beautifully to the pressure. Up in front of the audience, all the students told their stories with more intensity and enthusiasm than they ever had. In fact, I’ve never had a student opt out. This long-awaited night enabled my students to share their literary adventure with the larger school community—many of whom helped them shape their stories along the way.

Ripples Continue: Bringing the Inside Out

When Harriet Arkley (Mrs. Broccoli) came to tell stories to the children at the beginning of the unit this year, she gave the following tip for learning to tell a story:

If you want to learn a story well enough to tell it, tell it often. Twice a day if you can. Keep on telling it until it becomes a part of you. Then it will be your story to tell. After that, keep on telling it.

One of the great things about telling a story is that it is never exactly the same. The more a storyteller tells her story, the more she knows it and is able to add personal touches

Recommended Resources

Books:


Internet:

* www.storynet.org Homepage of the National Storytelling Network. Numerous Web links, articles, listings of college courses, festivals, and other resources. NSN can also help you find storytellers in your area.*
and details (Hamilton & Weiss, 2005). Most stories can be changed for the specific audience, or even the mood the storyteller is in.

Consequently, I made sure that storytelling night was not the last chance for my students to share their stories. There were still opportunities for my students to make connections and meet needs in an even wider community. I scheduled a field trip to a local senior day health center for an hour of storytelling. Sure enough, the stories the students told weren’t exactly the same as they told them at storytelling night. Some of them were beginning to “read” the audience, adding captivating details and gestures. One student, Brianna, saw how much the adults liked to join in, so she quickly thought of a way they could participate in hers. She knew she had made an excellent choice when she finished and she was met with roaring applause. Seeing the audience members’ faces brighten and hearing them talk about the stories connected the students to the adults. The students had something to talk about with the adults; they had a meaningful, shared connection, which they didn’t have before.

This is only one example of bringing students outside their immediate community to share their stories with others. Such community interaction adds a service-learning element to the classroom (Billig, 2000). Aside from going to an adult health center, other destinations might include nursery schools, community events, or children’s hospitals.

Making Waves: Going beyond the Classroom

Technology, too, allows us to extend our community beyond our immediate environment. Each year I create a DVD of my students telling their stories. This DVD is useful for several reasons. First, it lets students share their stories with friends and family who are too far away to experience the story face-to-face. I also show the recordings in my classroom during the storytelling unit—I may show a past student’s story one day as a model for using arm gestures; another day I show a few stories for the students to practice giving constructive feedback. To expand the benefits of this DVD, I started including excerpts from interviews I conducted with my students about storytelling at the end of the unit to provide an opportunity for self-assessment and reflection on learning (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999). In the interviews they talk about what was fun about storytelling, what was challenging, and how to learn and tell a story. This part of the DVD has been particularly helpful to others (such as Tracy’s preservice teachers) interested in storytelling units for their own classrooms. It provides a realistic glimpse into the process, and as the students discuss how they made such a huge undertaking manageable, their connectedness with one another shines through. Anyone can tell they have become a community of learners.

Conclusion

When the students in Heidi’s third-grade classroom walk up to the stage to tell a story, they may be going up there on their own, but they are not alone. They go with the storytellers that have come before them and those who have told their story before. They go with their teacher, and with the classmates and family members who have helped them prepare for that moment. And when the applause starts and they walk off the stage, they go knowing the circle has rippled out even farther, embracing yet another community.

By the end of the third-grade’s storytelling evening, everyone is abuzz. Some parents are talking about how their child rose to the occasion. Others are laughing with younger siblings, already retelling parts of their favorite stories. The principal is congratulating the children and the teacher is thanking parents. And the storytellers? They have huge smiles and are re-living the moments of their tellings with those who truly understand.

References


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