

Storytelling: the missing link in story writing

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that talk is central to writing development and that throughout the process of writing children need the opportunity to share ideas, comment upon each other's work and evaluate their compositions through conversation. However, the reality of classroom practice, pressured as it is by time, targets and accountability, does not always reflect this. I agree with Jimmy Britton (1982) who suggested that 'reading and writing float on a sea of talk' and consider that the presence and nature of this talk is critical if we want to foster increased engagement and achievement in writing.

Children need to talk about their writing, about for example its content, genre, features and style, but they also need to be able to rehearse the flow, fluency and feel of their words, to try out their own and others' tunes and receive a real response. In narrative writing in particular, children need to be given the time to tell their tale, whether this is a retelling of a known tale or an invented one, so they can bring the story to life, speak the structure and shape the meanings in their own words. Currently, teachers use a wide range of analytical tools to help children construct the shape of narratives, but these are too often applied immediately to the written word and disappointment ensues when the link between the story map, for example, and the written tale is tenuous.

This paper argues that oral storytelling, and particularly the retelling of traditional tales, is a missing link in the relationship between reading and writing, and that storytelling could be capitalised upon more in the classroom to enrich the quality of narrative writing. Through direct teaching and considerable experience of telling and retelling traditional tales with their clear structures, strong characters, repetitive

and figurative language and archetypal issues, children come to make fuller use of these features in their own written narratives. Furthermore, through orally re-telling traditional tales children imaginatively inhabit rich fictional worlds and often borrow ideas and images from these worlds in later unconnected writing. There are suggestions for classroom activities and examples of children's narratives are included to illuminate the many ways in which regular opportunities for storytelling can contribute to clearer and more powerful written voices.

Early narrative competence

Young children experience a range of stories in the home: on TV, video, in computer games, on the web, in conversation with others and through the games they play. While different cultures and communities make different use of stories (Brice-Heath, 1983), all of us harness this universal human competence to make sense of our experience, give order to our lives and shape our identity (Hardy, 1977). Longitudinal research into early home and school language suggests that narrative is a major route to understanding (Wells, 1987). As a primary cognitive tool, narrative is arguably indispensable, an 'irrepressible genre' (Rosen, 1988) which enables us to comprehend what events mean to us through our own inner and outer storytelling (Bruner, 1986). Furthermore, it has been shown that preliterate children with a wealth of experience of story, have considerable knowledge about narrative conventions, plot lines and linguistic styles in their oral retellings (Fox, 1993). In the culture of the classroom it is possible to enrich and refine this early narrative competence through leaning on oral and written literature and ensuring stories are shared, told, retold, shaped, polished and valued. Building a community of oral storytellers in school connects to children's oral language competence, complements the story reading and story writing already in existence and celebrates the integration of the three language modes.

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Later lip-service to the oral tale?

However, despite the wealth of tales that children bring to school in the form of family stories, reminiscences, anecdotes, hopes, dreams, televisual and other tales, the opportunities for children to tell or retell oral stories in class are too often limited. Whilst early years' practitioners may share oral tales, this is not always followed through in the later primary years and children themselves are relatively rarely given the opportunity to be storytellers, telling tales to each other, to other year groups, or schools. Drama and poetry festivals are common in local authorities, but few offer chances for children to celebrate their competence as storytellers. This may be in part due to the measuring and reporting of merely scribal outcomes and the recent concentration in England at least on Assessing Pupil Progress (DCSF, 2008) in reading and writing, such that talk remains the Cinderella of the curriculum. However the key skills of crafting and creating which are central to writing (Myhill, 2005) are also central to oral storytelling. Storytelling is arguably under-recognised in primary education both as a potent oral art form and as a tool for supporting written narrative. The underuse of storytelling may also be linked to teachers' limited professional confidence in telling tales and in modelling this creative language practice (Grainger, Gooch and Lambirth, 2005).

Talking, telling and writing

Talk, whilst it is a tool for learning, also has a performative aspect and considerable artistic potential. The traditions of oratory and storytelling deserve to be re-visited and developed in school, enabling children to find pleasure in the sound and savour of their words, and to experience the evocative power of language. Their oral artistry can also make a rich contribution to their written work. The latent oral narrative skills of the profession need to be energised if the power and potency of storytelling is to be harnessed in the classroom (Gruegon and Gardner, 2000; Harrett, 2009).

In relation to personal stories, the work of Zipes (1993) and Rosen (1988) amongst others has shown the significance of oral autobiography and of individual as well as collective memory in the formation of identity. If you give space to children's personal

stories in the classroom, you may well be surprised by their narrative capacity and spoken fluency; as Maybin (2005) has shown, their everyday talk is highly creative. In relation to traditional tales, these may prompt more active audience engagement and encourage listeners to journey alongside the teller, experiencing the poetic resonance of the tale. If you give space to traditional tales, you will also find this form of literature can play a key role in English and make a real contribution to children's writing (Grainger, 1997; Barrs and Cork 2001; Frater 2001; Grainger et al., 2005).

Speaking and listening undoubtedly contribute to writing development (e.g. Bearne *et al.*, 2004) and the links between oral and written language are often exploited in classroom work. Talk in shared and guided writing, and in response partners can make a real difference to a young writer's growing competence; such talk is likely to involve questioning and responding, commenting on meaning and language as well as suggesting ideas for improvements. This talk can help writers focus and improve their work, but when the genre is narrative, an additional form of talk needs to be explicitly included: oral narration.

In creatively narrating a tale children rehearse and prefigure their story writing. Through this process they begin to own the structure they have adopted or invented and stretch their voices as they prepare for writing. Furthermore, the emotional engagement involved in telling the tale to others can help drive the task of writing and support their awareness of audience. On many occasions, however, the tale will not need to be written as well as told, but experience of telling, on a regular basis, can, over time, help create richer links between talking, reading and writing (Harrett, 2009). The fluency, flow and control over language which oral storytelling offers has much to contribute to narrative writing. So, as part of the process of teaching story writing, real time needs to be afforded to the generation and exploration of oral narratives. As David Almond, the author of *Skellig*, *Kit's Wilderness*, *Heaven's Eyes* and other acclaimed children's novels observed:

*The roots of story are internalised through the circle of reading, listening, **telling** and writing.*
(David Almond, 2001. My emphasis)

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Children deserve to experience the roots of story through immersion and engagement in storytelling and drama, as well as through reading and writing. Through voicing and experiencing narratives first hand, they inhabit and explore the nature of story. Experience as tellers and shapers of tales can help children and adults develop a deeper understanding of narrative which can enrich their writing.

Creating a storytelling ethos: 'We've stories to tell'

The new primary curriculum proposed in England (Rose, 2009) offers considerable scope for teachers to combine several areas of learning, and using a range of tales from around the world for example, develop children's understanding of human, social and environmental issues. Scientific and technological understanding as well as understanding in the arts, can also be explored through the adroit use of oral stories. Work on storytelling can be extended through working with professional storytellers (visit the Society for Storytelling for support www.sfs.org or your local Arts Council). Classrooms that foster storytelling give significant space to personal narratives of lived experience as well as to traditional tales. The resource bank for storytelling is enormous and can be tapped into on a regular basis and expanded as you read, search the web and attend storytelling events.

Personal tales in particular need to be given higher status as part of the ongoing educational agenda, not merely when the literacy focus is on autobiographical tales. These can be heard and told to small groups of trusted friends in a wide range of contexts, as making personal connections right across the curriculum is important, fostering learner creativity and involvement. Through sharing personal stories children revisit memories, learn about themselves, their culture and identity, and learn to lean on personal events as experienced writing frames for narrative. The structure of lived experiences offers a distinct shape to stories and the resultant stories are frequently conveyed with verve and feeling as something of oneself is shared with others.

In committing these to paper, writers often capture their personal involvement, and respond to the immediate feedback offered by friends. Feedback and

response during oral tale telling are significant, since although this may be unacknowledged at the time, they subtly influence the teller's written version. For example, as a personal tale is being re-told in turn to several friends, it will be redrafted and re-shaped often unconsciously as a consequence of the response of the different listeners. These subtle changes may then be more consciously crafted through writing.

Traditional tales, myths, legends and fables can also be relied upon as a resource for oral storytelling, since as their characteristic features suggest, they were originally moulded for the ear. Their frequent repetitions, overt musical rhythms and clear story structures aid memory retention and their memorable language, often markedly extreme characters and consideration of archetypal issues, allow them to be revisited with interest. Whilst once handed down by word of mouth alone, many of these tales have since been published, revealing a wealth of adaptations made by successive generations and across different cultures. In offering children the chance to retell such tales, we are developing their verbal artistry, their ability to creatively revisit narratives, using their language, intonation, gesture, feeling and voice. Traces of each teller cling to each storytelling, just in the way a potter's hands shape and mark their work, and with time and experience, engagement and reflection, some of this style, as well as significant features of the form, find their way into children's written prose. In producing a written version, which builds on an oral retelling of a teacher's told tale, children can become more aware of the multiple choices available to them, both as storytellers and as storywriters.

Opportunities for telling

The experience of orally telling tales needs to be seized frequently as an embedded part of English and as a support for speaking, listening and story writing. Such tellings may involve whole tales or partial retellings, retellings from particular points of view or group narrations leaning on a story map or representation. If enriched writing is sought, extensive storytelling opportunities need to be offered regularly as an integral part of literacy learning, not as an occasional bolt on exercise prior to writing:

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We cannot produce or decipher stories without some implicit competence in respect of narrative structure... This competence is acquired by extensive practice in reading and telling stories. (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983)

There are many ways to organise storytelling including:

- *Retelling in teller and listener pairs*: Following a story, pairs take it in turns to retell the tale or part of it. The teacher can revisit one section such as the beginning of the tale and then the pairs continue, swapping roles in response to a tambourine or other prompt.
- *Retelling in a class story circle*: The tale is passed around the class with each new teller taking up where the last one left off. A story token related to the tale can formalise this.
- *Retelling in small group story circles*: A group's chosen tale can be retold by being passed around the circle, or alternatively a narrator can lead the tale with friends as characters voicing their parts.
- *Retelling in small groups using a representational device*: This can support and structure the telling. For example, groups can make a corporate story mountain (opening, build-up, dilemma, resolution, ending) and prepare to tell other groups their chosen tale using this visual support. (See <http://www.primaryideas.co.uk/literacy/storymountain.doc>)
- *Telling to partners*: When a new story has been mapped out, or planned on a story skeleton for example, pairs can gather together to hear the whole tale, or a selected part of one.
- *Telling in a story buzz*: Following a representational activity set around a personal tale, e.g. a timeline or emotions graph, the whole class find a friend with whom to swap a tale from their timeline. After some time, class members move on again to listen to others' tales and to tell their tale to someone else.

Such informal storytelling opportunities provide audiences for telling but may also be enriched by more 'formal' tellings to other classes, other year groups, to visiting parents, Teaching Assistants and

others. In all these contexts you could guide the children to focus on developing particular aspects of their storytelling such as:

- Creative voice play (e.g. volume/intonation)
- Gesture and body movement
- Pause and pace
- Facial expression/eye contact
- Visual aids and artefacts
- Framing opening sentences/ musical introductions and endings
- Involving the audience.

Their tellings may act as a precursor to writing, although do try to avoid the dulling inevitability of writing always following telling. Storytelling stands in its own right as a valid language arts practice which, if given time, status and creative space can undoubtedly enrich story writing in a variety of ways, some of which will now be examined.

Structuring story writing

Traditional tales are a particularly powerful resource for supporting structure in writing, since they often have distinctive story patterns and overt narrative structures which make them easy to remember, imitate and build upon. As Frater (2001) observed in his survey of KS2 writing, effective schools make full use of traditional tales from different cultures as these help with story structure. The often repetitive, sequential and accumulating patterns in such tales provide an effective scaffold for learners. However, much will depend on how teachers tap into this structural strength.

Over recent years, a wide range of representational activities has been developed which focus on developing children's awareness of narrative structure. These can be used to explicitly teach and explore the structural features of chosen tales. Relying upon literary models, whether written or oral, teachers can show children how to deconstruct texts in order to reconstruct new ones based upon the same organisational features. Story shapes or pictures, story structure charts (Newman, 1989), story seeds, story plates, story mountains, story hands and emotion graphs (Grainger *et al.*, 2004) and story mapping, can all be used to help children track the key events in the story,

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to access characters' perspectives about these and to be aware of how the setting relates to the structure. Narrative writing frames have also been developed which can be applied to certain kinds of stories, for example, block graphs for cumulative story structures, like 'There was an Old Woman who Swallowed a Fly' (Lewis, 1999). Once they are familiar with them, children's later story plans can lean on these various frames in order to build new tales which build on the visible skeletal structures of the old. Such analytical activities are useful tools to develop children's story schema.

Activities for representing story structures include:

- geographical maps
- timelines
- story hands
- story seeds
- storyboards
- journeys (A to B; A to B to A)
- cumulative block graphs
- emotions graphs
- story skeletons
- story mountains.

A common problem, however, is that despite the often high quality of the charts, maps and storyboards drawn by children, their written tales sometimes bear little relation to the explicit structure depicted. The assumption that such explicit analysis will lead directly to structurally similar written production is questionable. Using texts as models makes sense, but the road between awareness and application is not a direct route. Rather it is a series of interconnecting highways that need to be literally travelled and fully experienced many times; oral narration can play a significant part on such journeys. For example, a common KS1 practice is to sequence pictorial versions of stories. As a collaborative activity this will probably involve cutting, sticking, and ordering the key events and may help prompt recall of the tale but this storyboard also needs to be used for retelling the tale to others who have never heard the narrative. This enables the story to be voiced, shared and internalised.

Storytelling also provides a purpose for the storyboard, an audience for the story and an opportunity for the teller to inhabit the story, experience its rhythms and

feel its emotional temperature. In revisiting tales as individuals, in pairs or groups, through a range of oral storytelling and performance related activities, children can actually feel the structure, the tunes and rhythms and begin to engage with the story schema and the characters at a much deeper level. Inevitably this takes longer, but it can increase the productive use of strong narrative structures and enrich children's repertoire of available possibilities.

Figure 1, Damian's keyword summary of Kevin Crossley Holland's Nigerian story 'The Hunter and his Five Sons' was used by this eight year old as a prompt for retelling to others in class. After taking it home to tell to his younger brother, the prompt was returned to school and a week later was leant upon, alongside the experience of the telling, when he retold a chosen part of the tale in writing. The written extract also reflects the ordered structure of the narrative in which each brother responds in turn to his father's corpse. This pattern of oldest to youngest is used on three occasions in the tale, and highlights the sons' diverse responses that turn out to be significant in the final dramatic denouement.

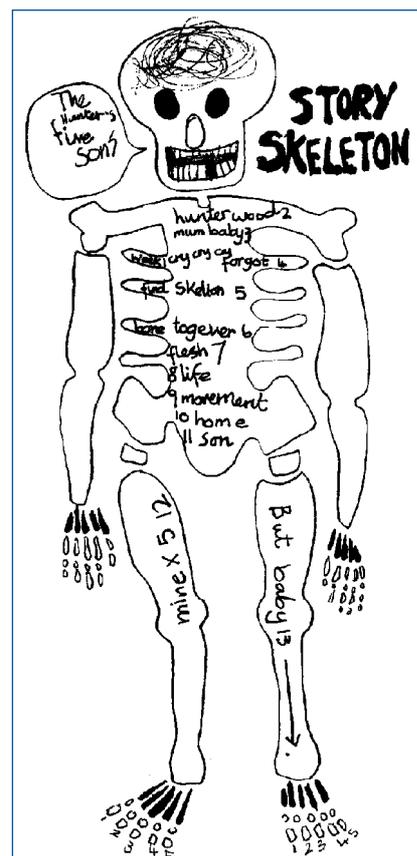


Figure 1.
Damian's
keyword
summary.

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In many cultures, threesomes are common in traditional tales, and whilst children can be told this, or may observe it in the trio of narrative events, the presence of three characters, three tasks, three terrains and so on, it is only when they voice the narrative and inhabit the action as the storyteller themselves, that they will experience this and learn it for themselves. The very act of retelling allows children to become more familiar with the narrative patterns of both personal and traditional tales which can introduce them to problem-resolution structures, journey tales, circular stories, trickster tales, cumulative narrative structures and many others.

In addition, the integration of a variety of connectives giving coherence and flow to the structure of the narrative can be enriched through oral storytelling. In groups, retelling a tale and beginning each part with another connective or noting connectives on a story map prior to retelling, can help prompt their use, as can oral storytelling conferences and taping and reviewing tales. Children can make full use of story structure strategies to tell the tale, and can 'dress the skeleton' with their words and gestures as they engage with the shape and tenor of the tale. In order to support the structuring of later narrative writing, the bare bones of stories need to become 'well dressed skeletons' that are spoken first, revisited and rehearsed, performed even and only later perhaps committed to paper.

Voicing evocative language

Retelling known tales enables the storyteller or writer to lean on the given framework of events and frees them to work on the emotional and physical landscape of the tale: the language of its evocation. The rich figurative language of traditional tales and the immediate personal engagement expressed in memories and anecdotes can widen and enrich children's choices in writing. It is not, however, enough that powerful words and phrases are heard, read, noticed, discussed, recorded and celebrated in classrooms, they need to be used in real storytelling contexts to create images, paint pictures, evoke atmosphere and build suspense. Their initial employment will be easiest in oral form, in the context of re-weaving tales that entice their audience in and enliven the narrative.

The oral tradition with its rich descriptions, constant patterns, strong images and memorable repetitive language can usefully be leant upon, borrowed from and experimented with through storytelling. In re-voicing even one part of a known tale, children make spontaneous choices about vocabulary, style, language and imagery and begin more fully to inhabit the narrative they are revealing. Through this process children experience the colour, shape and drama of words and their power to influence the audience. It is not only that they absorb the characteristic 'tunes and patterns on the page' (Barrs, 2000), but that they play the tune into existence, and feel its rhythms in their blood and bones. When trying out powerful language and combining it with silence, intonation, gesture and expression, storytellers receive immediate feedback as they speak. The relative intimacy of the telling context and the language of traditional tales encourage particularly rich visualisations and make clear imaginative demands on the teller, which over time will be tacitly transferred into their writing as the following extracts from two six year olds indicate:

Nearby was another mountain. A tall rocky mountain with no trees on it, it was bare and lifeless. Except that is for the monster who lived there. Now this was not just any old monster, but an ugly and gruesome one. The most fearsome monster in all the world. Jon

It was a very long and tiring journey for Moonkaia. He searched on mountains, through thick dark forests, down deep valleys and in rivers. But there was still no sign of his sister. Moonkaia was exhausted but he would not give up, he loved her too much for that. Jade

The experience of working on the Nepalese tale 'Sunkaissa, the Golden Haired Princess', and preparing to tell it to several groups in the class who had never heard it before, had been a lengthy process, crowned by the intense pleasure and satisfaction of the telling itself. A week later these children's chosen written retellings still reflected this engagement, and showed how the structural security of the known tale released them to make choices about vocabulary, style, language and imagery. The rest of the class were equally successful, telling other tales to friends. Together they published a popular class tape of traditional stories.

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In addition, through storytelling children are actively using, experiencing and repeating a variety of grammatical constructions that are part of the literary language of many traditional tales and the repetitive oral refrains of others. The inhabited voice of the child storyteller, whose verbal choices, energy, inflection, and voice play bring an oral story to life, can significantly influence their later writing. The transfer from engagement and use of powerful language in oral storytelling to their use in written contexts is again not a motorway, but a journey which is influenced by the wealth of experience of storytelling. This will also be influenced by a range of reflective activities which develop children's metacognitive awareness of the components of successful storytelling and its relationship to writing.

Developing characterisation and perspective

As children retell tales, whether in the third person or from one character's perspective, they speak the voices of others and may vicariously experience their struggles, perspectives or feelings. This can prompt empathetic insights, help them make judgements about certain characters and develop views about their behaviour. The range of voices, registers, gestures employed to denote particular individuals will contribute to their characterisation and can in turn assist the authorial evocation of these individuals on the page. In considering the differences between speech and writing, you could for example, explore with the children how to convey the significance of facial expressions or body stance in writing. As work on drama and writing in role has shown, when children adopt a role perspective they often communicate more powerfully from that inhabited stance (Cremin *et al.*, 2006), their writing includes more mental state verbs which express the character's emotions more explicitly (Barrs and Cork, 2001). Partial retelling from a particular character's perspective may take place in drama sessions focused around an oral narrative, when role play, overheard conversations, gossip, and so on are used. These opportunities tap into the inhabited viewpoint of a character and provide learners with further lived experience that they can use as a basis for writing. Research suggests that the opportunity to voice self-chosen perspectives in role in drama, prompts a more than usually assured use of first person

narration and accurate use of tenses in children's writing (Cremin *et al.*, 2006), suggesting that combining drama and storytelling as supports for writing can be highly effective.

Engaging the audience creatively

Oral storytelling is a fluid social process, an interactive event in which the audience's subtle responses to aspects of the tale influence the narrative as it unfolds. Through substantial experience of storytelling, children learn to take their audience into account, and creatively shape their story responsively at the moment of utterance. 'They laughed at the funny bits,' Ralph aged seven years informed his teacher with delight, 'so I added more of them - they loved it!' His sense of the bond between the teller and the told was heightened through tale telling, drawing out his imaginative and linguistic potential. In the context of writing, such experiences can increase children's awareness of audience and support their ability to influence and affect their readers.

Storytelling in its immediacy with the audience, its communicative power and exploration of archetypal themes reminds learners of the purpose of narrative and involves them in exercising creative control over their listeners. As Hillocks (1995) notes, we write narratives because we have a story to tell; in most writing the substantive purpose comes first. Through oral storytelling children are able to tell tales to a live audience whose feedback shapes their oral drafts, which may in themselves be part of the construction and composition of their later writing.

In addition to highlighting children's awareness of their audience, retelling can release children's creative energy and tap into their capacity for innovation. Storytellers naturally experiment with tales and play with the characters, the themes and the language in the story to create new meanings through subtle alterations (Rosen, 1988). The creative reworking of each tale is germinated in the earth of the 'original' and offers increased ownership to the teller. Professional writers as well as oral storytellers have trodden this road of revisioning for centuries: exchanging, reducing, expanding, shaping and experimenting with tales. Oral storytelling provides children with the chance to percolate their personal experiences, revisit favoured

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tales, rehearse their verbal artistry and voice ideas that may later be expressed in writing. Through the process of reflecting upon their chosen tale, whether memory or traditional, writers begin to discover what they want to say. This process of selection, reflection and oral sharing enables children to focus on the development of fluency, on shaping ideas and clarifying the issues and gives them the opportunity to flow thinking into words with creativity, innovation and artistic flair. Time for development of these competences is important, since the 'incubatory period' of literature (Britton, 1982) needs to be honoured and children often need time both to let a tale gestate in their unconscious and to try out oral versions prior to committing any of it to page or screen.

In conclusion

Just as children's talk is too often short-changed in the teaching of writing, oral storytelling is too often a missing link in the teaching of story writing. Teachers need to encourage the teller in each writer to stand tall, to share and shape the stories of their lives and the stories of many cultures with voice and verve. Rich oral experience of telling, retelling and refining texts has the potential to be a valuable tool when integrated fully into the process of teaching and learning about writing. The tradition of oral storytelling offers learners much more than this however; it is both engaging and confidence building, and offers rich opportunities for conscious crafting, imitation and innovation.

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