

# Tell Me Another...

## Speaking, Listening and Learning Through Storytelling

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# Introduction

## The Power of stories

Stories, like dreams, take us to places we have never seen, activities we have never experienced, events we have not witnessed and introduces us to people we have not met. Through narrative we escape the everyday, the mundane, and travel to a land of new experiences. We can explore danger and fear from the comfort of knowing that it is fantasy and not reality. This mental journey, which most people would describe as imagination, needs to be developed in children and storytelling is one way to do so. Narrative is 'central to early learning and thinking' across the curriculum (Grainger, 1997). Oral storytelling develops the visualisation skills that aid memory and enhance understanding and encourages development of speaking and listening skills.

Oral storytelling also seems to be becoming marginalized in schools. The pressures of a narrow curriculum may be blamed in part for this (Winston & Tandy, 2001). Teachers make comments like:

*I haven't got time.*

*We have to use the time for reading.*

*I'd like to do more storytelling and the children enjoy it but is it really educational?*

This last response is, I suspect, what a great majority of teachers feel because 'The value in terms of literacy is not so instantly visible' (Graham and Kelly, 2000:72). Storytelling seems to be almost a subversive act and the benefits difficult to measure while 'teaching pertains to what is real and knowable' (Paley, 1995:3). With increasing pressure on teachers to produce evidence of learning how do they prove that storytelling is beneficial?

The complexity of the fundamental skills of speaking and listening can often be lost in the current emphasis on reading and writing. Effective oral communication is at the basis of our society and without this skill children

are at a disadvantage. It seems extraordinary that oracy is almost a sleeping partner in the literacy process or, as Alexander believes, 'at best a poor relation' in Britain (2002). The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum acknowledges this by admitting that 'discussion of reading, writing and numeracy in primary education often fails to recognize the central importance of developing children's spoken communication' (Rose, 2008:3). The renewed Primary Framework in England emphasises the role of speaking and listening in language and communication development and all of the suggestions in this book fulfil the objectives in the speaking and listening strands (see: <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/strands/> accessed 3rd March 2009).

Through the telling and retelling of stories children develop effective communication and also self-confidence. Storytelling encourages active listening and audience response and allows the child to extend and explore narrative in a unique and personal way. Baker and Greene (1977) advocate the use of oral stories for many reasons including supporting the curriculum and preserving cultural heritage. In our multicultural society this is important if all children are to feel valued. What better way to celebrate cultural differences than by telling stories from around the world? This can involve parents re-telling the stories from their childhoods to their children who, in turn, can share with others in the class. My personal introduction into storytelling was through my parents during my childhood in Ireland. My mother constantly recounted everyday anecdotes in detail and my father coloured my childhood with tales of fairies, giants and 'the little people'. It was pure magic and I was lost in the world of the imagination.

## **Storytelling**

Storytelling is often used as a blanket term to cover the areas of both oral stories and their written counterparts. Writers are described as good storytellers when what is meant is that they are able to write a story convincingly. Although the oral and the written are intertwined in many ways it is important to make a distinction between the two discrete forms of storytelling and story-reading.

Gruegeon and Gardner's (2000) comment on the difference between written and oral stories is worth reflecting upon:

*Perhaps that is the difference between reading and telling; reading is a process of sharing and interpreting a text that someone else has produced but telling a story is a unique and personal performance (Grugeon and Gardner, 2000: 2).*

Mallan (1991) deliberates at length on the differences between the two modes of story and says:

*With storytelling, the interaction is creative, as both teller and listener create the story. Words are used to create mental pictures of the story. The storyteller's face, voice, body and personality help to convey meaning and mood. During story reading both listener and reader are conscious of the book (Mallan, 1991: 5).*

The uniqueness of the oral story is reflected upon and the interaction between the teller and the listeners is seen as an important, and indeed essential, element of this uniqueness. Mallan (1991) comments on the mental images created through the words but it is not simply the words but the manner in which the words are transferred which is important to 'meaning and mood.'

### **Listening differently**

Bearne (2000) maintains that the challenge in schools today is not so much to develop children's listening skills as to develop their awareness of how to pay attention. Involving children in meaningful and interesting listening activities to maintain attention is important. Baker and Greene (1977) argue that storytelling encourages the art of listening as a storytelling session presupposes listeners who play an active part in the process. Listening to and sharing stories also enables children to develop their vocabulary in a meaningful and pleasurable way (Browne, 2007).

In my experience of teaching young children I have noticed that children listen in different ways and I have categorised these into different groups. Teachers will undoubtedly recognise pupils under the different categories:

- ***Participatory***: these are the children who play a part in oral sessions, joining in refrains and actions and showing an active role in the process. They are fully engaged, eyes fixed on the speaker and openly reacting and interacting with the story or activity.

- **Reflective:** these children listen but can appear to take a more passive approach. Although they remain fixed on the words and actions of the activity their responses are less obvious. They may just smile or nod in reaction to a part of a story and it is difficult to gauge their thoughts.
- **Superficial:** children who appear to be listening but who are not fully attentive. They may be quiet and look as if they are aware of everything but in fact they are just hearing the words without reviewing or thinking about what is being said.
- **Deceptive:** listeners who appear to be inattentive but who are able to recall the story, or what was said, in detail. Sometimes these children will seem to be more interested in the Velcro on their shoes, the books or toys on the shelf or even the jumper or hair of the child nearest to them yet they can tell you exactly what has been said.
- **Inattentive:** the child who has heard but not listened actively and is unable to recall anything but the very basics of what has been spoken. These listeners may display symptoms of superficial or deceptive listening. Some children look as if they are listening (superficial) but are not. Others (deceptive) are obviously not paying full attention. It is only through talking to the children that the teacher can estimate how much they have actively listened and into which category the child fits.

As teachers we want to encourage children to listen rather than just hear. Oral storytelling often succeeds in producing more active listeners, possibly because it appeals to a wider range of learning styles. Storytelling is a performance art, a mode of delivery that invites active listening. It demands reaction and interaction and participation from the audience as it depends very much on the use of voice, gesture and eye contact. It is a shared experience and through active listening the audience is transported to a different world.