

Student Storytelling in the Classroom and Beyond

By Sue Black and Bev Frett

Grades 2-5

National Council for the Teachers of English : Standards for the English Language Arts

American Association of Health Education: National Health Education Standards (NHES)

NCTE 1 READING FOR PERSPECTIVE

Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

NCTE 3 EVALUATION STRATEGIES

Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

NCTE 4 COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

NCTE 7 EVALUATING DATA

Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

NCTE 11 PARTICIPATING IN SOCIETY

Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

NCTE 12 APPLYING LANGUAGE SKILLS

Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

NHES 4.5 USING COMMUNICATION SKILLS TO PROMOTE HEALTH

Students will demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal communication skills to enhance health--

- Distinguish between verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Demonstrate attentive listening skills to build and maintain healthy relationships.

Objectives: Students will select a story and learn how to tell it. Students will learn the components of effective communication: visualization, summarization, identification of emotions and mood, addition of voice and gestures, question development, and connection to real life.

A fifth grade student stands in front of 100 first graders and tells a story. He takes a deep breath. He feigns pushing his sleeves up to his elbows, pulling open the mouth of the dog, and reaching down, down, down to pull out a cat! *That's* why the dog had been meowing. The first graders roar with laughter.

As storytellers, students have the opportunity to do it all – read, write, listen, and speak. They have fun experimenting with voice, facial expressions, emotion, and gestures that make the story “just right” for telling. As they present their story, the art of listening becomes a two way street. By using good eye contact and ‘reading’ body language tellers communicate with their audience. That’s not all! The activities and skills that they learn will be used across the curriculum and throughout life.

Lesson Plan:

Start With a Story

The storytelling lesson begins with the students listening to their teacher tell a fable. Then they form small groups to process what they heard. As the teacher asks questions about the fable, the students answer orally in their small groups: Who are the main characters in the story? What do they look like? Where did the story take place? When did the story happen? What is the problem? Why is there a problem? How is each of the main characters feeling about that problem? How is the problem resolved? What happens in the beginning of the story? What happens in the middle? What happens in the end?

Each small group then retells the fable round-robin style – one sentence at a time, passing the story around the circle until it is complete. Not only do students demonstrate their understanding of the story and story structure, they also practice listening and respect for what others contribute to the story. After each small group has retold the story, they find another small group and tell it again. Students delight in the discovery that stories change with each telling. Their homework? Tell the story again to someone at home.

Read, Read, Read

Now that your students are excited, it’s time for them to discover the 398.2’s in the library – folktales, fairy tales, legends, tall tales, and fables. Their goal is to read at least 5 different stories before making a final selection. Once they choose the story they will tell, students reread the story two more times. First time: read the story out loud to determine if you like the sound of it. Second time: read the story out loud and time it. A good rule of thumb for first-time student storytellers is to choose stories that are between five and seven minutes long.

Storyboard and Tell It Ugly

Once students have read the story three to four times it is time to close the book and draw a storyboard. Students are asked to visualize the story – draw it, complete with color. Students fold a piece of paper into six or eight squares. They draw the main scenes of the story. No word bubbles allowed – visual language only. No fancy artwork required. No copying illustrations from the book. When complete, students find a partner and use their storyboard for their first telling. The student points to each scene on the storyboard and tells the story in their own words. This is the “Tell It Ugly” stage. This first telling won’t sound pretty or polished but it is important to ‘just to do it’. As the students move away from the text and illustrations in the book to their own images, the words they use to describe those images become their own too. As the students continue to work with the story, each time they tell it again it will sound just a little less “ugly.”

Bringing the Story to Life

This is where student tellers dig in and add their own personalities to the story. Students are challenged to experiment with voice: high/low, fast/low, and loud/soft. Ask: What emotions are in your story – anger, heartbreak, defiance, bravado, joy, sorrow? Does your voice match the emotion you are describing? Do your facial expressions and body language communicate those emotions?

Dialogue provides aural action in a story. Model how easy it is to convert narrative to dialogue. Ask: Where can you add dialogue to replace some of your narrative? A great exercise to give students practice with this concept is to give them a line of narrative from a familiar story and ask them to brainstorm dialogue to replace the narrative. For example: the narrative ‘Mama Bear called her family to the table for breakfast’ becomes “Papa! Baby Bear! Breakfast is ready.” It doesn’t take students long to discover how much more ‘alive’ a story sounds with dialogue to move it forward. Try some of these:

- Baby Bear complained his porridge was too hot.
- Papa Bear suggested they all go for a walk.
- Goldilocks saw three bowls of porridge sitting on the table.
- Goldilocks thought the chairs looked comfy.
- The boy thought watching sheep was really boring.
- The villagers told the shepherd boy they were very angry he had tricked them.
- The boy told the villagers he really had seen a wolf.
- The soldiers came to the house and told everyone there would be a ball at the castle.
- Cinderella really wanted to go to the ball, too.
- The fairy godmother told Cinderella to dry her tears.
- The fairy godmother told Cinderella to be home by midnight.
- The prince asked Cinderella to dance.

How about gestures? Give students the opportunity to brainstorm with one another ideas for adding simple, waist-up gestures that enhance, define, or replace a word. Is there a mirror or window they can stand in front of as they practice? Encourage students to have a reason for adding a gesture and making that gesture ‘clean’ – solid, simple, and definitely not sloppy.

Walk, Talk, Listen, Respond

Get moving! (shared with the permission of storyteller Bob Kann) Take your storytellers for a walk. Have each student find a partner. Decide who will be the first teller and who will be the listener. As students walk the halls of your school, or around your library or gym, they practice telling their story to their partner.

Try adding a little ‘Popcorn’ to your practice sessions. Divide your storytellers into two groups, tellers

and listeners. Paired and seated in chairs, each teller faces a listener. On your command, each storyteller begins telling their story. After a minute or two of telling, call out “Popcorn!”. The storytellers stop telling immediately. They pop up from where they are sitting, trade places with someone else who is standing up, and resume telling to a new partner. Repeat until all stories are complete.

Listeners have a responsibility during this part of the storytelling unit – their job is to listen for the good stuff. What’s working? What was communicated well? Which facial expressions and gestures worked well? What use of voice added to the story? Only after the listening partners have offered positive feedback can they then offer one suggestion to make the story even better. They should phrase that suggestion by asking, “Have you thought about . . . ?”

Assessment:

Tell ... and Tell Again

At this point, students are ready to tell their stories to small groups of peers or to a younger class. How do you measure success? When students stand in front of their audience ... smiling, proud, mistakes and all ... they’ll be ready for more and so will their listeners. That’s success!

Use the following S.M.I.L.E. checklist to track student progress:

Stand tall and sound proud

- Student spoke clearly.
- Student told with confidence.
- Student stood with a relaxed posture and didn’t fidget too much.
- Student handled mistakes without getting upset.

Make the story your own

- Student sounded natural (not memorized).
- Student chose words that painted a picture.
- Student changed voice to suit the character(s) or mood.
- Student included some dialogue.
- Student added simple gestures that enhanced the story.

Interact with your audience

- _____ Student greeted audience with a smile.
- _____ Student captured the attention of audience with a good beginning.
- _____ Student made eye contact with audience.
- _____ Student used facial expressions when appropriate to tell the story.
- _____ Student varied the pace of telling.

Love your story

- _____ Student practiced story.
- _____ Student told story with appropriate energy and enthusiasm.

End with a smile

- _____ Student finished story with a clear ending line.
- _____ Student accepted the applause with a nod or smile.
- _____ Student thanked audience.

Since 1999, Storyteller and Teaching Artist Sue Black and Library Media Center Director Bev Frett have teamed up to teach storytelling to students at Clow School in Naperville, IL.

Related Resources:

Books:

Collins, Rives. 1996. *The power of story: Teaching through storytelling*. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Hamilton, Martha and Mitch Weiss. 2000. *Noodlehead stories: World tales that kids can hear and tell*. Little Rock, AZ: August House.

Hamilton, Martha and Mitch Weiss. 2005. *Children tell stories: A teaching guide*. 2nd ed. Katonah, NY: Richard C. Owens.

MacDonald, Margaret Read. 2004. *Three-minute tales: More stories to read & tell when time is short*. Little Rock: AZ: August House.

MacDonald, Margaret Read. 2007. *Five-minute tales: More stories to read & tell when time is short*. Little Rock: AZ: August House.

MacDonald, Margaret Read. 2000. *Shake-it-up tales: Stories to sing, dance, drum, and act out*. Little Rock, AZ: August House.

Sima, Judy and Kevin Cordi. 2003. *Raising Voices: Creating Youth Storytelling Groups and Troupes*. Westport: CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Websites:

Clifton, Sharon Kirk. 2001. "Why tell tales in school?" <http://groups.msn.com/SharonKirkCliftonStoryteller/whytelltalesinschool.msnw> (accessed March 2008).

"Clow school storytellers." http://clow.ipisd.org/lmc_storytellers.html (accessed March 2008).

Kokie, Stan. November 1998. "Storytelling: the heart and soul of education. PREL Briefing Paper; Pacific Resources for Education and Learning." <http://www.prel.org/products/Products/Storytelling.pdf> (accessed March 2008).

McWilliams, Barry. 1998. "Effective Storytelling: A Manual for Beginners." <http://www.eldrbarry.net/roos/eest.htm> (accessed March 2008).

"NCTE Positions and Guidelines: Teaching Storytelling, A Position Statement from the Committee on Storytelling." 1992. <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/curr/107637.htm> (accessed March 2008).