

Storytelling in the Learning Environment The Primary Teacher

Abstract

This article is based on the oral storytelling and it briefly explores the art form from its origin to its current role. A brief exploration of how and why oral storytelling works, what is the space it occupies, and what possibilities does it hold in the multi-media inundated scenario today.

In the last two decades, I have worked with over 1500 teachers and 1 lakh children across India and the world. Performing, conducting workshops, writing articles and doing independent research. Each experience has offered a different dimension of understanding. The impact of storytelling I realized is not only academic but also non-academic. Exchanges with other educationalists, professional storytellers and researchers guided my journey. With a 15 year old and 13 year old at home, I have also recorded some anecdotal journal entries as a parent. Being a performance storyteller, inspired by Indian oral traditions I understood and honed my craft over the years. This article attempts to share essence of the learning. And hopefully generate engagement with oral storytelling and its pedagogical possibilities.

What this article comprises in brief

Its genesis

Brief history of the oral tradition

“There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.” —Ursula K. LeGuin

Storytelling is an ancient art form that has existed ever since man learnt to speak. Stories are how we experience life and how we store the experiences. Yesterday is a story. Tomorrow is a story. Stories are how we connect with ourselves, with the world and with life itself and make sense of it all. As humans we are constantly seeking to frame our lives in narratives. And we always have done the same in the past. Thus there lies an intrinsic appeal in making and sharing stories.

Storytelling invites us to journey through time and space using the simple strength of the speech and words. It

urges us to creatively visualize and craft almost-real experiences. Each one of us has allowed ourselves to ‘day dream’ sometime. And day dreaming is rather enjoyable. Storytelling is an invitation to the listener to ‘day dream’ except that it is ‘permissible’ not punishable and it is ‘channelized’ not random. Here lies the charm of listening to stories.

It is such a fascinating and magical trip that it becomes infectiously engaging. Stories are filled with symbols and metaphors for life’s larger meanings. And they reflect the innate philosophy that the purpose of life is not about seeking or finding but about

introspection. Storytelling thus takes us effortlessly on the journey of life within and without.

“You have to understand, my dears, that the shortest distance between truth and a human being is a story.” —Anthony de Mello

Oral tradition in India

India has a rich oral storytelling tradition. Our forefathers had always been aware of this and so they packed all the wisdom of life and knowledge of living into stories. We would agree that most religious teachings of the world are through stories. In our country we have Mahabharata, Ramayana and more recently the Panchatantra, Katha SaritSagar, KasiMajilikathalu, and a plethora of folk lore. Origin stories have always been a wonderful way of sharing knowledge or perceptions about nature and its origins. The story of Panchatantra goes that three good for nothing princes were transformed into efficient and wise capable royals in six months just by listening to the stories of the Panchatantra from the author and their guru Vishnu Sarma.

World over traditional storytellers through their storytelling are meant to keep alive the heritage and customs of generations gone by and share the learned wisdom. India too has a very rich story telling tradition that is infused with the richness of music, dance and poetry. They have many different forms and names in different places such as: Harikatha in Karnataka, Burrakathain Andhra Pradesh, Kathakalekshepa in Tamil Nadu, Pandavaniin Madhya Pradesh, and OttanThullal Kerala and so on. Traditional storytellers are still performing in the towns and villages. Patronage, audience interest, financial viability and the number of performers have all sadly dwindled over the years thanks to television, mobiles and other screens. While the other

ironic and positive side of the story is that social media is also slowly in some ways bringing to light, the work of oral storytellers.

Learning versus instruction

The beauty and power of storytelling is the strength of ‘realization through revelation’. Through the stories the teller ‘reveals’ and the listener ‘unravels’ his/her truths. Given a choice everyone prefers to ‘figure out things’ for themselves rather than be ‘told what is right and what is to be done’. And so the listener is taken through a trip where she/he gets to discover new insights by herself/himself from the story.

“ ‘Thou shalt not’ is soon forgotten, but ‘Once upon a time’ lasts forever.”

- Philip Pullman

Storytelling in the learning environment

In the current scenario of unlimited access to digital support in education, the teacher often wonders what is the role of oral telling in the classroom? In the age of the multi-media inundation the simple art of ‘human conversation-storytelling’ becomes all the more valuable.

In this multi-media inundated age that we live in, most of the people do not seem to appreciate or value the significance of oral narration. However, a small group has sustained engagement with storytelling both as an art form and as a pedagogical tool. This small set of people are slowly making an impact and one can say we are at the threshold of the revival of storytelling in India and the world. .

The art and its heart

Storytelling is a social art of connecting with one’s audience....no machine can replace that joy of being acknowledged by the teacher. When we tell stories, we are telling our children that we value

spending time with them. We are saying that we value speaking with them. We are saying we shall travel together to distant lands and return as friends. Whenever and wherever I have told stories, I find people open up and often speak to me with much trust. They feel a bond has been built. You must have encountered this as a parent or as an educator. Therefore, through storytelling we are opening a part of ourselves and inviting the listeners to also do the same.

The story goes that in a small African village an experiment was done. A man from the city left a television set and said, "Now you don't need your storyteller. This box knows more stories than any storyteller". He went back after a month to the village and was surprised to find that the whole village had deserted the TV box and had gone to listening to their storyteller! When he asked the villagers why they were not watching television they simply said,...

"The television knows many stories but the storyteller knows us"

– African Saying

A claim can safely be made that the digital explosion is no threat to traditional oral telling. We can always find simple, innovative ways of inviting the children back to this familiar, simple, culturally-rooted, inexpensive, warm and gentle space of listening to stories. Many teachers are using stories in the classroom already; however we could do the same more purposefully and gainfully.

Children and storytelling: Do we easily encounter children who dislike listening to a story? Children are naturally inclined to listen to and enjoy stories. Bruno Bettelheim in his book *'The Uses of Enchantment'* states that stories appeal to the 'I'. They offer a chance to vicariously experience what we may not ever be able to otherwise.

We can use stories very effectively for language learning, if we approach in a structured manner. Story telling is an interesting way of getting the child to both listen and try imitating language patterns and structures that she has unconsciously absorbed. My experience with over 15000 teachers across the country and the world has continually reinforced the belief in these possibilities. The impact is much more than we imagine.

Story telling in the broad sense of the term refers not only to fairy tales or other contemporary ones but also to stories constructed around mathematical/scientific facts or anything else for that matter. The child learns to both interpret and create texts of her own.

Stories, imagination and learning

Let us look at storytelling as extensive literature that the child is exposed to and which she willingly joins in pursuing. Her imagination is fired as she travels in time and space. Thus in a non-competitive and cooperative environment language acquisition is fostered using a conducive social platform.

*"If you want your children to be smart tell them stories,
if you want them to be smarter tell them more stories
and if you want them to be even smarter tell them even more stories!"*

– Albert Einstein

Whole language acquisition through storytelling

Learning English language through storytelling is much like learning the mother tongue. Did we learn grammar from Mother, pronunciation from Father or intonation from grandmother? It is a holistic acquisition of the mother tongue. Same is the case with learning

through storytelling. There is ease, lack-of-fear, and natural ways in the process of language acquisition.

Not only in the learning context, the young learner can benefit much with respect to her confidence building, social interactions, cooperative learning, memory skills development, fluency in speech, overcoming fear of reading, motivation for writing and more.

For the classroom

My work with 'Art of storytelling and its pedagogical possibilities' has often taken me to the classrooms. In a private school in a small town near the city of Vizag, the teachers had trained with me in storytelling and would start the day with 15 minutes of storytelling in their classroom. This was for class pre KG to class 2. Hardly 3 weeks had passed, that the teachers began to observe the children were voluntarily sharing the stories (in English), especially dialogues that they had heard with each other in their free time, complete with actions and intonation. "Snake, Snake, did you take my biscuit?" "No, but I think you should go and ask someone else". Quite a long sentence for children who do had never spoken English in the classroom before. Don't you agree? Well the bigger surprise was after about one and a half months they were beginning to replace this with, "Seema, did you take my pencil?" And Seema replied, "No, but I think you should ask someone else".

How had this happened? The children enjoyed the narrative so much that it stayed in their heart and they felt the need to share it. They had listened to the story and were developing their listening skills of knowing how to interpret speech and simultaneously they had a reference model for speech. The context and the 'performance with drama' offered ways to 'arrive at meaning'. So their vocabulary grew

as well as the ability to figure ways to comprehend a word. The sentences in the story being grammatically correct, the children learnt to construct correct grammar in their speech, without as yet 'knowing' the rules of grammar. This they did by using similar constructions in a different context. In fact the learning they had naturally acquired and employed it in a context relevant to their day-to-day communication.

For a school run by a charitable trust, after the English language work was progressing with much popularity, I was requested to work with the school science chapters. So I read the class 5 chapter on deforestation and created a story which brought out the concept and the concerns it raises. It was agreed after discussions with the teachers, that the story would be shared, discussed and then become the entry point for the text book lesson on deforestation. It worked way beyond our expectations. The children not only enjoyed the story, they also chose to make a skit and perform the same at a science fair. What is important to mention here is that, the language of the narrative resonated with the students and was easier to comprehend and retain than the language of the text book.

Apart from the telling of the story, what is equally important is, the manner of telling, the reassuring co-operative learning environment that is built in the process, the age-appropriateness of the story, the contextual relevance of the story, and inclusion of various post-storytelling activities oriented towards specific learning-related goals. Activities such as art-response, role-play, drama, song, game, dance, group-discussion and more will go a long in helping to reinforce the learning generated by the storytelling. The ideas are only touched on briefly here as this paper serves as an introduction. However in the process of training

teachers and working with them in their context one evolves effective reference models to work with in the classroom.

These are a few examples, a mere suggestion of the exhaustive range of possibilities that lie within the art of the oral narrative and the related arts, the Story Arts.

Including diverse cultures and artsthrough storytelling

India is a nation with multiple cultures and multiple narratives. Bringing in different narratives, languages, music and movement, much like our rich oral traditions across the country, is an effective way of enriching the storytelling experience and also acknowledging the diversity in the classroom. Different children and their background gets a representation through storytelling which is inclusive of different languages, their rhymes, songs and other cultural aspects.

Over the last 18 years, I have traveled and worked with children from all across the country and the world. Austria, Scotland, South Africa and others. I have worked with over 600 English language adult learners from over a 100 countries. These story exchanges offer not only academic benefit but also a strong 'bridge', a 'connect' to the world of 'the other'. Thus stories and their oral sharing continue to remind us of the multiplicity of worlds and multiplicity of world-views. A valuable reminder indeed.

Conclusion

And returning to the role of storytelling as pedagogical tool for learning

language: apart from listening, speaking, vocabulary and grammar, various post-storytelling activities can effectively contribute to development of reading and writing skills as well. The benefit is not for the student alone but as much for the teacher.

Not only student but teacher development too

In India, Africa and other Asian and Latin American countries, the English language teacher struggles with language and language teaching issues herself. Storytelling offers scope for teacher development too, with respect to her zone of operation such as: Developing her communicative effectiveness and improving communication patterns and/or language proficiency. The teacher becomes more confident and/or interested in accessing and engaging with the language resources available. A self-sustaining interest in language teaching is often generated. Storytelling employed regularly offers scaffolding particularly with respect to spontaneous classroom communication of the teacher.

The significance of the narrative framework and the oral tradition can deeply impact the learning environment. Thus it would be benefit us all, to relook at storytelling in the learning environment and employ it in a slightly more structured manner. The simple low-cost, zero technology tools can be meaningfully employed for far-reaching results. And the finest part of it all is that we can use it anytime and anywhere, bringing smiles and opening new worlds of learning and development for both the teacher and the taught.

Bibliography

- Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language Teaching*, 36, 81-109. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444803001903>.
- Egan, K. (1992). *Imagination in teaching and learning: The middle school years*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ellis, R. (2010). Second language acquisition, teacher education and language pedagogy. *Language Teaching*, 43, 182-201. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444809990139>.
- Hall, G. & Cook, G. (2012). Own-language use in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 45, 271-308. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000067>.
- Kumar, K. (1986). *The child's language and the teacher*. United Nations Children's Fund.
- Watson, D. (1989). Defining and describing whole language. *The Elementary School Journal*, 90.