

Preserving Tradition and Enhancing Learning Through Youth Storytelling

Ann M. Scroggie*

Once upon a time, oral storytelling ruled. It was the medium through which people learned their history, settled their arguments and came to make sense of the phenomena of their world. Then along came the written world with all its mysterious symbols. The ability to read and write now ruled many lands. Oral storytelling, like the simpleminded youngest brother in the olden tales, was foolishly cast aside. Oh, in casual ways people continued to tell each other stories at bedtime, across the dinner tables, and around campfires, but the respect for storytelling as a tool of learning was almost forgotten. (NCTE Guideline, 1992)

Stories are the essence of a culture. Whether they teach how to live in a hostile or fragile environment, represent the collective memory of people, encapsulate the values or promote a hero, storytelling is at the heart of cultural identity and social life (Koki, 1992). It is the recounting of myths, folklore and other forms of oral narrative that maintains group solidarity and identity. Story has the power to transform, reform and re-ignite. Once stories are no longer told and re-told, the culture dies and the people are lost.

By examining what storytelling is, how it controls cultural behavior and promotes identity, this paper will have definitive reasons for preserving storytelling. Next we will observe how storytelling can enhance learning and finally will suggest strategies that have been implemented to change the

* Professor Emeritus of Speech Communication, Santa Fe Community College, New Mexico, US.

contemporary storytelling landscape. Throughout the presentation, it should be evident that the involvement of young people is imperative.

Storytelling is a traditional art form which has been practiced for thousands of years in every society and culture known to humankind. Traditional stories have been passed from generation to generation through folktales, songs, rituals, chants and even artifacts. These oral narratives are critical historical components that pre-date written words. They explain the culture and how it came to be.

The fact that stories are told or performed orally is a distinctive factor that is embedded in the qualities of the storyteller's persona including voice, gestures, movement, and even clothing. Some storytellers are called elders, legend keepers or tradition bearers and often receive extensive training to ensure the accuracy of the story. Others become story enthusiasts and historians, who choose to teach through storytelling, and still other tellers simply tell for entertainment and performance. Regardless of the reason for telling, it is the task of the teller to explain "how things are, why they are and our role and purpose" (Herrmann, 2007). Storytellers have become a part of society and its development and therefore an integral part of the culture of each community. Throughout the centuries, storytellers have been honored and respected and people sought them for advice and council through story.

So, what is storytelling? The National Storytelling Association has adopted the following statement for its membership:

At its core, storytelling is the art of using language, vocabulary and /or physical movement and gestures to reveal the elements and images of story to a specific, live audience. A central unique aspect of storytelling is the reliance on the audience to develop specific visual imagery and detail to

complete and co-create the story. (National Storytelling Association, 1997)

This explanation clearly delineates the role of storytelling and suggests its separation from written literature. Stories illicit a “live” or immediate response from the listener and so, storytelling becomes an interactive activity between the teller and listener in which imagination forms the pictures. Meaning for the stories is established in the minds of the listener based upon his/her prior experience. Likewise the storyteller must understand the story nuances, background and meaning and adapt that information to the response of the audience. The story experience then is a co-creative exchange of thought.

Through this exchange, stories link the past to the present and thus help people understand cultural and social mandates by recognizing the consequence of certain behaviors. In other words, by listening to stories, people learn social expectations. They acquire knowledge and information which explains everything from season changes to animal behavior thus giving them survival information. For this reason, “Every human culture in the world has told stories” (Herrmann). Ong, further suggests, “in an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, must be repeated or it would be lost” (Ong, 1982). And so, stories must be repeated to anchor ideas in the minds of the listener. Thus the role of the storyteller is further expanded.

In order to know who we are, it is essential to know who and what we have been. Folktales or stories about people and their activities provide with the oldest accounts which have been shared among people. They tell us how life was for the peasant and the king and for the old and young. They often tell us the history of a particular area, the values of the people and how they lived and the customs that dictated behavior. This information gives us “roots” and assists us in building a personal identity.

To illustrate the profound effect of story, researcher and anthropologist, Carolyn Nordstrom, who spent time working with Angolan war orphans, tells this story. Entering a group of children's "home" in the storm drains, she was amazed at the immaculate home and order imposed by a group of children. They had created a "family", a culture where everything was shared equally. This example speaks to the power of story to teach and dictate values (Ledding, 2009).

People and communities need and use stories and ultimately become "story dependent" because story explains their world. Stories preserve and transmit history as they are passed from generation to generation. But it is important to know that stories transmit more than the plot. The way it is told also becomes part of the tradition of the people.

Tribal Elder Cecilia Kunz writing about the Tlingit community's need to preserve its identity to and with the land and animals, tells how the people use a combination of story, totem poles and dance to "pass on" traditions and to express the beliefs of the culture. These story performances are celebrated in festivals and holy days. The belief and understanding about the interconnectedness between humans and the world become the central idea of the story and is sealed in the unique tribal tradition (Kunz, 2008).

The Bhutanese culture, living in contact with the environment, likewise uses storytelling often accompanied by dance, music, masks and clothing to instruct the people about the land and its value (Evans, 2006). Folktales reflect the beliefs, cultural identity, vocabulary and language forms that relate to the community that originated the story. By collecting and preserving these stories, Evans believes that through story the country can identify the values that make its people happy thereby ensuring harmony and pride in the place where the people live. This is the goal of GNH or Gross National Happiness initiated by the King of Bhutan. Identify the culture and tradition and you understand the people.

Levette Davis, in his book, *A Guide to American Folklore*, suggests that folktales provide bridges from one culture to another. In this contemporary society where people are separated by differences in race, cultural bias, economic status, and geography, the historical information dealing with how “folks” live and the folktales which guided them, may be our best tool for dealing with cultural gaps and diversity. In other words, stories have the power to persuade people to understand that we can and must live peaceably with those people who are different than we are.

It would seem that this critical cultural component would be the central focus of a community and that every effort would be made to preserve and promote storytelling. However, in many countries, storytelling has lost, and is losing, its relevancy and so the loss of cultural identity.

As our culture advances, new tools and technologies evolve so that people are comfortable. However, too often these devices destroy older culture by promoting instant gratification, excluding elders or the disadvantaged population, denying the oral heritage, and do, instead, propagate a written or digital culture (StoryBase). Writing literacy replaces the oral component as the primary communication device. People prefer to read and write to acquire knowledge and information.

Annie Auckland, lead teacher of the IB Cambodia program, points out that two problems occur with the emphasis on print. First, there may be a lack of accessible literature in schools and communities and second not every language has a written code or alphabet thereby rendering reading and writing inaccessible to most citizens.

A more relevant example of the accessibility of print material is observed in Bhutan. Until 1960, modern education in Bhutan was negligible with only 11 schools and 400 students.

By 2008, it is reported that 447 primary and junior schools and 455 education centers and 155,234 students are now a part of the education system (Adhikari, 2008). However “overcrowded classrooms, limited and poor library facilities, lack of sufficient and appropriate reading materials...are recognized as major hurdles” (Hariprasad, 2009). In Bhutan, the accessibility to print proves to be a deterrent to reading and literacy among the people.

The printed word, then, important as it is to learning, may have signaled the decline of oral traditional narration in some areas, and proved not to be the best answer to literacy. A far greater impact on the decline of storytelling may be observed by a simple turn of a knob and the room is saturated with noise, color, and movement through the magic of television. Programs, which have taken millions of dollars and thousands of hours to produce, quickly replace the one person rendition of a folktale, fairy tale or personal experience. Television is simply more entertaining and takes less listener involvement!

Add the other media and electronic invasion, such as iPods, cell phones, e-mails, Facebook, and DVDs, which transmit stories in an abbreviated form, and we find people communicating with “things” instead of humans. The sender of the text message is unseen and may be unknown. The receiver of the message must decipher the message, code it and hope that he/she understands. We have a game of ambiguity which, because of no live transmission, loses information.

These electronic substitutes, while rampant in the United States, are also seen in many countries and nations. Kunzang Choden, collector of Bhutanese folktales, writes, “I came to the conclusion that the art of the oral tradition is definitely on the decline, worse still, the story sessions are rapidly being replaced by video sessions.” She went on to note the response

of a Bhutanese storyteller who said, “Why do you want me to tell old stories?”

Choden further recognized the importance of the stories as a link to her personal identity and observed that her cultural base could be lost for her children. “Knowing their base, they may better understand and appreciate their own lives” writes Choden and so, she began his collection of “old stories”, – folktales which are lost in the mountains and minds of people of Bhutan (Choden, 1994).

Stories are the models for what has been and the predictors of what can be. They are the key to understanding, tolerance and problem solving. However at this time, it appears that storytelling as a community activity has been declining in many countries and areas. This loss poses a potential danger of misunderstanding and a loss of communal identity. Preservation of stories is not an option, but a necessity for the survival of a global society.

Turning our attention to learning, we find teachers expressing difficulty in motivating students to listen or read. The result is shown in low test scores and difficulty communicating ideas and information. Noting the need for using storytelling in the classroom, Sima and Cordi, veteran storytellers and teachers respond: “Storytelling is the ultimate teaching tool. Unlike television...or computer learning which is passive, storytelling encourages face to face interaction. With storytelling, young people actively participate in learning. A true educational environment is formed.” K. W. Zabel agrees and further states: “Storytelling is the cornerstone of the teaching profession” (Zabel, 1991).

Because stories rely on words, they become a source of language for humans. Hearing, which begins in the first weeks of fetal development and ends only with physical or sensory impairment or death, provides people with a constant

means of learning. It requires no auxiliary support such as books or recording instruments and is readily available to everyone within range of the sounds being produced. It is a natural tool for the teacher and is invaluable in managing and teaching. We teach and learn through speech. And speech, when organized into stories, provides information. "Surely stories should be a central part of the world of primary teachers whether they are teaching the mother tongue or foreign language" (Wright, 1995).

Research supports the idea that "even students with low motivation and weak academic skills are more likely to listen, read, write and work hard in the context of storytelling" (U.S. Department of Education, 1982). National storytellers Judy Sima, Sherry Norfolk and Barbara McBride-Smith and Donald Davis, who frequently visit and do storytelling residencies in schools, report rapt attention and participation from classes of students. If for no other reason, this motivation incentive should be the reason for placing storytelling in school curriculum in an effort to improve educational performance.

Second, storytelling is a foundation for literacy. Without the acquisition of knowledge, upward mobility is thwarted. We store information in our brains, but if the database is not filed, the retrieval is not possible. Our educational systems require students to learn data and facts which may have no "real" connection or meaning for the learner. Stories create images and "file" facts in settings and situations connected to people and events. Thus the factual data becomes interrelated and meaningful for the student (Caine and Caine, 1994).

Story is the best vehicle for passing on factual information. It is the ultimate teaching tool. By retelling a story they have heard, the learner transfers images into his own words repeating the information and integrating it into the database. Sima and Cordi suggest that, "Stories are trapped in books: it is the storyteller who sets them free." And when set free,

students begin searching for more information and explanations.

More specifically, in the literacy search, storytelling enhances reading, writing and speaking skills. There is general agreement that oral narrative provides the listener with a model of structure and organization of ideas (Gillard, 1997, NCTE, 1992). Both reading and listening are similar processes in that both involve receptive processing. Reading print material requires much individual practice and skill acquisition, while storytelling involves a physical presence of a teller with a story. The children listen vicariously at first and then become immersed as the story unfolds. "By telling stories, students associate reading with pleasure," state Weiss and Hamilton, "which is an important step towards literacy." If children identify reading with worksheets, they are likely to view reading as tedious and boring and may refuse to study. When we consider that the lowest achievement scores across the nation rest in reading, we note that a New York Times study regarding the reading habits says that ninety percent of fifth grader children are spending less than one percent of their free time reading (McBride Smith, 2005).

However when students have heard and read stories, writing appears to be more spontaneous. Weiss and Hamilton suggest that the reason for this interest is that "stories beget stories". A live interactive storytelling session allows the teller to explore the story without penalty and criticism. The teller simply makes the story "his own" version spontaneously. His audience helps him mold the story and ideas so he is not alone (Hamilton and Weiss, 1990).

Writing is a one-person task that requires both thought processing and the ability to control penmanship or typing while adhering to the rules of composition. It becomes more tedious, requires the knowledge and application of composition rules and thus may discourage the student.

Marni Gillard observed marked improvement in writing skills, after having the children tell the story and then write. She recalls a teaching moment.

The kids stepped inside those stories and walked around in them. They figured out what made the story work. They got it because they stood inside a piece of literature and lived it. It was better than any lesson I ever did on rising-action and suspense building, turning point and denouement” (Gillard, 1996).

Gillard’s experience indicating writing improvement through storytelling is mirrored in other anecdotal records. NCTE also note that storytelling is a precursor for both reading and speaking and recommends that storytelling be incorporated into the curriculum. Lauritzen and Jaeger document the success of this program in an urban school setting, a resource classroom and a Native American reservation in *Integrating Learning Through the Narrative Curriculum*. All three programs were highly successful in terms of reading and writing success. When stories are included in the curriculum, it would appear that learning basic skills does improve.

Speaking is the medium through which ideas and stories are shared and yet in the United States, speaking is rarely taught in K-8. Few speech courses are taught on the 9-12 level and yet all students are required to make oral presentations. The result is that students and adults develop a public speaking fear which is so devastating that public speaking now ranks as the number one fear – ahead of disease, terrorism, and physical harm (Laskowski, 2000).

As a professor of public speaking for over forty years, it is this author’s observation that this is a learned phobia which has no merit for such hysteria. As a coach and mentor for youth storytellers, it is rare to hear this complaint. Children who tell stories interact with the audience thereby experiencing

success. Should younger children have storytelling experiences in the classroom and community, it is my belief that such fear would be reduced or eliminated thus providing a secondary benefit for the teaching of storytelling.

Upon review of several storytellings in the classroom books, (Hamilton and Weiss, 2003, Sima and Cordi, 2003, Gillard, 1996, McBride-Smith, 2005), I noted one common and obvious conclusion: students like to tell stories. There is no mention of the fear factor. All books record anecdotes indicate that children's storytelling experiences enhanced self esteem.

In fact, the child in the cover picture of Hamilton and Weiss book, *Children Tell Stories*, was eight years old when the photograph was taken. Now, at age twenty-three, she writes that she has used "storytelling and speaking as tool for success". She indicates that she has chosen a career which involves public speaking and attributes her choice and success to "beginning with story and having a healthy learning experience with people and books" (Hamilton and Weiss, 2003).

Storytelling with children produces increased competency in academics and therefore should find a place in the classroom. Here, the teacher can begin to bridge the cultural gap of understanding between adults and children, while teaching them societal standards, laws and values. Learning is and can be enhanced through storytelling.

Throughout the discussion thus far, it is evident that young people are in need of good storytelling programs. Adults may have been exposed to such programs in the past and thus may be the models and mentors, but the emphasis at this time is to find children learning to listen and tell stories.

Let us now turn our attention to some youth programs strategies currently being used in the United States. Jo Radnor, NSN President in a keynote address states:

After little more than 30 years ago, the young storytelling movement in the U.S. can claim significant achievement....However much more is required for professional storytelling to attain the same status as performing arts such as theater, music and dance. In our 30s and 40s, we begin to seriously address the direction our lives have taken. And so it is with young storytelling (Radnor, 2008).

One of the major advances in youth storytelling in the United States was the creation of a National Storytelling Network Special Interest Group appropriately named YES (Youth, Educators and Storytellers Alliance). This group of youth, coaches, librarians, teachers, teller and mentors are devoted to inspiring storytelling by and for youth. It focuses on teaching young people to tell stories, to develop and use stories as an educational tool.

In its nine year history, YES has been successful in establishing NYSS (National Youth Storytelling Showcase), a national youth storytelling competition based upon local state support. Each state has an adult coordinator or liaison who conducts the selection of the youth tellers to represent the state. There are five age categories so that children compete only with their peers. After attending the annual three day training, twenty young storytellers become ambassadors of storytelling attending festivals and local events for the next calendar year. DVDs of performance are archived and distributed throughout the country promoting youth storytelling. Financing for the weekend is provided through a contract with the city of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. The Smoky Mountain Storytelling Festival is held in conjunction with the showcase.

NSN provides grant opportunities to assist in financing, local cities support the children and tellers make donations. YES conducts workshops, conferences and maintains a website to keep members informed about youth storytelling opportunities.

One outgrowth of youth storytelling is the StoryBox created by Kevin Cordi. This local, national and international program has created a storage box which is sent to various localities where it is filled with printed and recorded stories, pictures and books. The StoryBox travels for one year before returning to the home base filled with its collection. This year, Cordi has recruited forty ambassadors to host the exchange. He is currently seeking international host agents (Cordi, 2008).

Other models of youth programs include state agencies such as Florida Storytelling Association's Youthful Voices program. Each year in a state contest, five tellers are selected to attend Florida StoryCamp and represent youth storytelling at concerts, festivals and conferences for the year. To date over 150 children have been selected and served for a year of travel and telling and promoting youth storytelling.

Independent programs such as Children International Story Program and Eth No Tec, meet and train children to present stories and study storytelling. Community libraries host summer programs and workshops to train and encourage young tellers. Professional storytellers travel to schools to present workshops through residency programs. And more recently, state parks have begun summer storytelling programs. Hospitals have established programs for children who are in need of care and counseling support. Clubs and children groups such as Scouts, 4 H, religious groups and nature groups have proposed merit badge recognition for storytelling. Schools have festivals and competitive speech programs have added storytelling as an event. Story Troupes and Clubs have begun to flourish. Homeschoolers are

frequent state and national competitors. And many Tellebrations now include youth tellers.

Not to be excluded from the list are digital storytelling programs such as “Flat Stanley”. These opportunities allow children to write and record stories and share them with other children throughout the world. Judging from the growth in interest, these are expected to rise in popularity.

It is evident that number of youth programs has grown as creative adults have organized and sponsored activities connected with storytelling. Without a doubt, the key component in youth storytelling is adult planning in the local community. Adults must assume the responsibility and receive the training to host children who want to tell.

Thirty years ago, storytelling began its resurgence in the United States. Eventually this revival found its way to education and children’s classrooms. Professional storytellers understand that preserving culture and enhancing literacy requires developing programs to mentor, motivate and provide venues for children to tell. From this insight, creative tellers began “growing storytelling groups” in classrooms and schools (Sima and Cordi, 2003). They have developed materials, trained teachers and children to such an extent that today’s storytelling market is saturated with materials, activities, games, teaching units, lesson plans and stories. Guidelines for clubs and story troupes are suggested. Whatever the classroom needs has been and is being addressed.

However, because storytellers are usually transitory, there is a need to have a story-teacher on location (Gillard, 2003). According to storytellers, Hamilton and Weiss, the key to success is the teacher as a model. And so, teachers must be recruited and given the following advice: “If you wish to convince students to tell stories, you must tell a story

yourself. By telling stories, you provide an effective model for risk taking and good-quality oral language. Perhaps most important of all, you inspire them” (Hamilton and Weiss, 1990).

From this initial telling, teachers begin to experience what has been termed “the power of story”. Ruth Sawyer, noted teller, states, “Storytelling is not a means for presenting limited material to the minds of children. It is an art demanding your integrity, trust and vision.”

Storytelling will, in time, lead the teacher to create and imagine programs and ideas. It will infiltrate the units of teaching and curriculum and, ultimately, the minds of children. There is no subject that cannot be taught through story.

Using stories results in enhanced cultural awareness and thus knowledge about other people. Because stories have been handed down through time, they are examples of the heart and soul of the people who created them. They are the treasured reminders of how life used to be in both good and bad times and they show some of the strategies and beliefs that make different groups what they are today. Stories do shape our day to day operations and the future that we face. Stories add much to life, and the benefits that they bring to a child’s culture and education have been documented.

Once upon a time, there was a child, a very young child, and she, like all young children, needed to hear stories—lots and lots of stories. She needs a storyteller to help her. (Koki, 1998)

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