



The Process of **Sharing** **Stories with Young People**

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Storytelling has become a buzz word in society today. It is used to refer to anything from a compelling work of fiction to the dissemination of corporate information, and it has found a home in such diverse fields as library science, business, psychology, computer science, education, advertising, and anthropology. Each discipline brings its own unique perspective to this art and defines it to suit its own needs. In librarianship, storytelling has long been the purview of children's story hours, and the emphasis has been on sharing world folktales that will help children "see themselves" in a story and learn about the other cultures that share their world. Folktales, having been refined over generations of oral retelling, have developed an innate power to speak to all of us; their survival in oral societies demanded it, as the weaker tales were simply told less often, or not at all, and disappeared. The tales that survived, then, were those that addressed deep personal and social needs and values (the archetypes, or fundamental ideas, symbols, and images that underscore all of humanity and that form the basis of social interaction). This universal cultural heritage still exists in these stories despite their written form. As society takes an increasingly global perspective, and the values and beliefs of individual cultures clash more frequently, these stories continue to show us that we have common bonds and experiences that can unite us despite our apparent differences.

My research and teaching have been focused on the immersive power of information environments, whether these are oral, print, or digital, though I must admit to a primary love of oral performance. Storytelling

as an oral performance of folk literature is the focus of this article and this issue; I will not address the performance of personal stories of our own lives, since the process of learning, shaping, and performing these kinds of stories is different in many ways from the process of sharing folktales.

Storytelling, for me, is not about plot! While we must learn the plot and convey it fluidly in performance, the *point* of a story is not that a character gets from A to Z and overcomes a number of obstacles in the process. I don't believe that we share stories just because we like Brer Rabbit or Paul Bunyan, and we don't share these stories primarily because of the adventures they encounter, though the messages embedded in these stories about correct behavior and social etiquette are good for everyone to hear. I feel we tell stories because they impact us *emotionally*; they make us *feel* differently than we did prior to hearing them, and so I emphasize with my storytelling students the emotional power of the stories they share. If we can identify the emotions we want our audiences to feel, we can share the plots and characters with focused intensity, with the intent of evoking an emotional response in our listeners. When we ask our audiences to *feel*, they learn on the most profound level possible—and they remember the stories and their messages, as we see in *Truth and Parable* (page 27).

What I offer here, then, is only one of many possible approaches to learning and sharing stories. If we want our children to develop an emotional literacy to complement and deepen their visual and print literacies, we must help them experience those emotions, and

what better way to do so than in the vicarious experience and comparative safety of a well-told story?

Finding a Story

Finding "the right story for the right child at the right time" has been a mantra for children's librarianship for decades, and it resonates with storytellers as well as librarians. The difference is that, for storytellers, the audience usually consists of more than one child, so the challenge becomes that of matching the needs of the many with the few stories possible in a short performance session. Selecting the best stories to tell becomes vital to the success of the experience, so many storytellers develop a large repertoire of tales from which they can select the best ones based on their perception of the particular audience of the moment. In this way, storytelling can be tailored each time to the unique group of listeners.

Know Stories

The best way to find good stories is to spend a lot of time reading folktales. The more you read, the better grasp you will have of basic folktale structure (see Joseph Campbell's work on the hero's quest and Vladimir Propp's "Morphology of the Folktale"), and you will begin to see what makes folktales effective. Margaret Read MacDonald's article (pages 22–24) addresses the most effective reference source for tracking down elusive tales: motif indices. These indices break stories into small parts and index those parts. This brings similar plot elements from completely different stories together, facilitating cross-cultural comparison, research, and lesson plan design. There are many such scholarly indices published, but the *Storyteller's Sourcebook* (both volumes)

is the only one focused on children's collections. Using it, storytellers can quickly pull together themed stories, stories by ethnicity or geographic region, or similar stories from various cultures.

There are many scholars who have addressed the selection of stories for telling. Marie Shedlock (1951) mentions that "irrespective of age, the first kind of story suitable for [children] will contain an appeal to conditions to which the child is accustomed" (66). In short, choose stories about familiar life events and settings. She also draws attention to the need for the unusual in stories to push children beyond their normal surrounding and experiences. While seeming to contradict the prior statement of familiarity, novelty actually works synergistically with familiarity to create an ebb and flow of comfort and edginess that draws children into a performance.

Shedlock's most important suggestion is, "I think it of the highest importance for children to realize that the best and most beautiful things cannot be expressed in everyday language" (90). Good stories do not belittle children's knowledge and abilities; instead they offer the best metaphors, the most mellifluous rhythms, and the most enticing adjectives to share the profound beauty of language. While today's e-mail, texting, and even conversation turns language into clipped phrases and emoticons, storytelling revives the immense power of language to capture location, emotion, and relationships. We owe it to children to share this linguistic heritage with them, to show them what language can do when used expertly.

Ruth Sawyer (1966), another early proponent of storytelling for children, speaks of how the storyteller must love the story she performs and should select stories that "leave the listeners with a complete sense of satisfaction," (154) and contain "unity," meaning that "the form, the subject matter, the emotions which inspire it and the words which clothe it shall stand in good fellowship, each with the other" (157).

Ellin Greene (1996) describes seven elements that make a story tellable: (1) a clearly defined, single theme; (2) a well-developed plot; (3) vivid word pictures, pleasing sounds, and rhythm; (4) believable characters; (5) faithfulness to source material, or stories that are not "emaciated adaptations or vocabulary-controlled tales"; (6) dramatic appeal, or stories that allow children to experience the "perfectly safe edge of fear and sadness"; (7) appropriateness for the listener (50-51).

All of these authors agree that the primary reason to tell stories to children is to involve them emotionally in the tales and to share the morals inherent in them. To maximize this effect, storytellers must nurture the art of storytelling through practice and a commitment to offering only the best to their listeners. While it is true that anyone can tell stories, only the diligent who develop their talent can tell stories *well*.

Know Children

The second most important component of finding a good story is a thorough knowledge of child and adolescent development and youth reading and information preferences. The scholarly literature

on both is extensive. Knowing the intellectual, emotional, and social development of an average third grader and what that child's life interests are helps tellers select stories that are "appropriate" for that child. It is important to remember that folklore was *not* initially meant solely for children, and many of the tales are filled with violence, fear, trauma, and uncertainty. These tales were meant as aids to navigating the stressors of life, to confronting and resolving conflict, and to offering hope and possible solutions to difficult socio-cultural and individual problems. While the violence in these tales is rarely gratuitous (and the argument can be made that the young child's fairly black-and-white perception of justice is supported by immediate retribution and obvious punishment), it can be shocking to prevailing sensibilities. What feels "appropriate" for one child may frighten or bore another, so it is the responsibility of the storyteller to manage the unfolding performance to best effect for all the listeners, taming it down if the reaction is too intense or increasing the drama if children show signs of inattention.

Learning a Story

Storytelling manuals abound that discuss the process of preparing a story for performance. Most speak of "making the story your own," which means spending time and energy thinking about and practicing the story so it is polished when you share it. I like to compare this process to that of a bubble forming in the muck at the bottom of a lake. The story begins as a general combination of ideas and plot elements that must sit and "decompose" in your mind for a while as you sort through it and make sense of it. Eventually this "story detritus" begins to take shape in your mind.

You have thought it through and discovered the power of the tale, and the desire to share it forms. At that point the bubble begins to rise toward the surface, but it must traverse the depths of the lake of the storyteller's personality and style, which adds color, shape, and other distinctive characteristics. After much practice, the bubble finally rises to the surface, where it stretches into iridescent glory, shimmering with all of the colors of possibility. This is the moment of performance, when the storyteller shares the transcendent beauty of the story with an audience and makes that moment of perfection last as long as possible. Inevitably the bubble bursts and the moment disappears, but if the storyteller is good, the memory of that coruscating beauty remains with the listeners long after the storytelling session has ended.

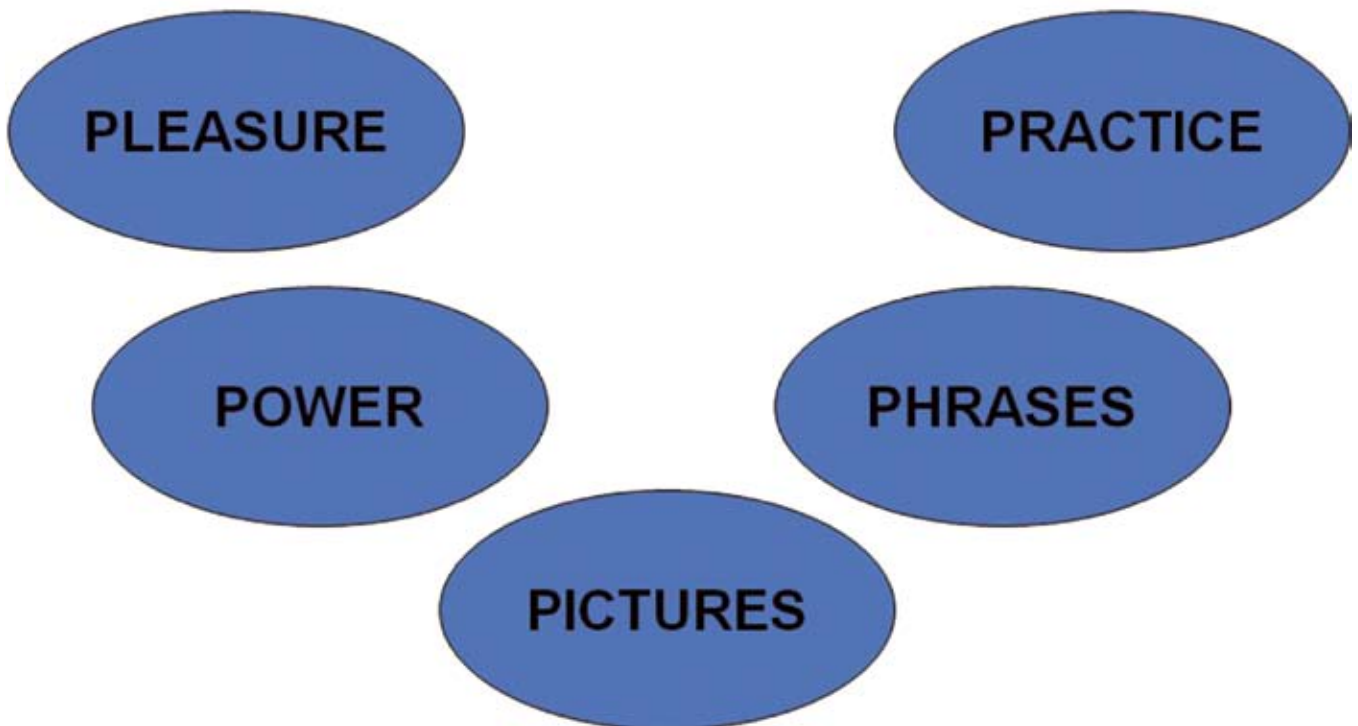
There are as many ways of learning a story as there are storytellers, so the model below is just one of many possibilities. I have found it works with my students as a way of systematically analyzing and internalizing stories so that we know them intimately.

When you find a story that you enjoy and want to tell, read it through several times just for pleasure. Revel in the joy you feel with the story, then ask yourself why you enjoy it. Once you understand why you like it, you have a better idea of what to foreground in the story for others. Next, read the story for its emotional power. What emotions do the characters feel and which of those do you want your listeners to experience? Try creating a line graph of the emotional highs and

lows of the story; this is not a graph of joyous emotions versus depressing emotions, but an *emotional intensity* graph in which you plot the shifts from emotional neutrality to emotional extremes. Exuberance, rage, despair, glee, and love would all qualify as emotional highpoints on the graph. Once you understand the power moments in the story (usually more than just the plot climax of the story), you will know the reason for sharing the story: to give your listeners a chance to share in this emotional rollercoaster.

Having analyzed the story, you need to turn to committing it to memory. Do *not* memorize the story, as this may lead to an artificial style and a greater likelihood of forgetting the tale. It also eliminates your ability to change the story on the basis

“5 – P” Story Learning Process



of audience feedback while you're telling it, and this flexibility is one of the essential ingredients of a superb story. Instead, turn the story into no more than five or six mental pictures or scenes. Longer stories, or more complex ones, may require a few more scenes, but even the most complex Russian tale can be reduced to just a few scenes in your mind. When you tell the story, recall your mental pictures and describe what you see. Should you forget the story, you can describe more of what your current scene holds while you try to recall the forgotten next scene; it also forces the storyteller to re-experience the story while he is telling it, and that dynamic involvement is contagious for your listeners. Once you have a series of mental pictures, put the original text away so you don't get too wedded to the literary wording. Written language has a very different rhythm to that of spoken language, and you need to use the words that *you choose* to describe what you see in your mind.

You should now tell the story aloud, though not necessarily to an audience. Find what works and treasure it. Find where you balk and strengthen it. Try to tell the story completely each time, rather than working on segments of it, as this will keep your mind focused on the story rhythm and the big picture. Once you can tell the barebones story through with only minor stumbles, it is time to flesh it out with details of your choice. Using your own words, add descriptions of the setting, add details that develop your characters, find innovative ways to convey the story's emotions, add appropriate gestures to intensify or clarify the tale, play with sound effects that might add humor or interest, and experiment by telling the story from

a particular point of view. This "playing" with the story will broaden and deepen your relationship with the tale and give it your own personal touch. Only after you have done this work should you go back to the written tale and see if there are specific turns of phrase or refrains that you need to memorize so they are reproduced exactly each time you tell the story. These phrases could be descriptions that capture the "flavor" of the originating culture or that are just too beautifully worded to leave out, or they could be chants, such as the "fee fi fo fum" from *Jack and the Beanstalk*, that add depth and power to the story. Sometimes a particular beginning or ending of a story needs to be memorized to capture a particular rhythm or an emotional intensity you do not wish to lose.

Finally, practice the story until you become tired of it. Then put it on one side for several weeks or months. During the time away from the story, it will continue to haunt your imagination, and when you return to it, the story will have grown fresh for you once again. That is when you begin to perform it for an audience of supportive friends who will help you refine it even further.

This process takes a long time! That is why Marie Shedlock (1951) recommends learning only a handful of stories each year. She writes, "There is one kind of preparation which is the same for any story, that is, living with it for a long time, until one has really obtained the right atmosphere, and then bringing the characters actually to life in this atmosphere" (141-42).

Performing a Story

Storytelling performance of folktales is a mixture of improvisation,

drama, and oral performance. It requires a delicate balance of voice, facial expression, gesture, posture, and emotional involvement so the storyteller—as person—falls into the background and the story can shine. This "invisible teller" approach helps decrease stage fright, since, if the performance works, the teller is merely the vehicle for the story, and the feeling of "they're looking at me" becomes that of "they're lost in my story."

One of the most overlooked elements of storytelling in the literature is what happens before you actually launch into the story. The introduction to the story sets the stage, establishes an initial mood, and acclimates the audience to your voice and mannerisms. Listeners need to be comfortable with your voice and style, or they will still be trying to relax after you've already begun, and they may miss the first part of your story. Give the audience a chance to find your rhythm and join it before beginning your story. For librarians, this introduction often includes a reference to the book in which the story is found. It can also include how you found the story, some background vocabulary that young people might not know, and any background details of culture or place that help situate and ground the tale. Can children visualize the Scottish Highlands? Do they know what a lemming is? Do they know the place of dragons in the Chinese culture? These details are most easily provided before the story so children have the best chance to experience the depth and breadth of the folktale you plan to share.

After the introduction, many storytellers pause to show the audience that the story is now

beginning. This pause heightens their anticipation, settles any last-minute turmoil in the audience, focuses attention on your face and eyes, and allows the storyteller to take a deep breath that fills the lungs with oxygen, clearing the brain and calming the nerves. Remember that nervousness rarely disappears completely for performers. We all feel it, but we learn with practice to harness that energy and funnel it into the story and the performance, adding dynamism and vitality to the performance. Do not fear nervousness: channel it.

Then slow down! Nervousness makes most people talk more quickly, and novice tellers often find themselves racing through their stories at top speed, leaving their exhausted listeners struggling to keep up. The right speed may feel inordinately slow at first, but it is better to relax and enjoy the performance than to harry your listeners through it. If you have done the work of preparing your story, living with it for a while, and making it your own, you are ready to revel in the delight of the tale and focus on sharing that evanescent “bubble.” As the story winds down, do not let your emotions and energy wind down as well, as you must end with as much passion for your story as began. As the inimitable Yogi Berra explains, “It’s not over until it’s over.” Don’t let your ending falter because you are too hasty to reach the conclusion. Savor each moment of the performance, ending with confidence and control, then release the story and your listeners back into the realm of the media center and reality. Many good performances are ruined by overly abrupt endings, so be gentle with the tale. Finally, once you have finished the performance, enjoy whatever appreciation you get

from audience: applause and smiles are the most common, but the long sigh of someone returning to reality begrudgingly is equally as rewarding, as is complete silence as listeners fight to stay in the enchanted moment you have created.

Tips for the Teller

The following twenty-two “considerations” when presenting a story should help you think about your performance prior to its unfolding, and they can also serve as evaluative measures to review it after the fact—evaluation is a vital part of building repertoire and improving as a teller, so do not forget this process once you have had time to distance yourself from the performance. Some of these ideas may seem a bit cryptic, but I have purposefully left them so because each storyteller must develop his or her own understanding of how—or whether—these “tips” apply.

1. Recall the mood of the story and open with a similar mood.
2. Eye contact is vital. Don’t look *through* your listeners.
3. Speak clearly, loudly enough to be heard without effort, and at an appropriate speed for the story.
4. Gestures should be natural and should never distract from the story.
5. Clothing should be comfortable and simple. Distracting clothing can detract from the story as people are tempted to look at you instead of listen to you.
6. Take control of the space. Move your audience around if necessary. The setting helps establish the mood.
7. Make the area comfortable for the audience (for example, climate control).
8. *Never* explain a story.

9. Cover difficult words in the introduction or let the audience discover them from the context.
10. Large groups are harder to “include” in the storytelling atmosphere, since those in the back can’t really see your face and expressions.
11. Offer the story as a delicate treasure, not as medicine to be taken.
12. Pause after your introduction and before the story to allow your audience time to prepare to listen.
13. Watch your audience for their feedback messages. Alter your performance accordingly.
14. Never underestimate the power of the pause.
15. Use character voices sparingly. Keep them consistent, and practice them thoroughly.
16. Use a “catchy” beginning to draw your audience into the story from the start.
17. The three fundamentals of storytelling are your voice, your words, and your facial expressions. Choose them all carefully.
18. Breathe normally during the performance. One or two deep breaths at the beginning of the session can also help calm nerves.
19. If the story is folklore, *don’t* memorize it. Let your own words imbue it with personality and power.
20. Work on the pacing of the story so there are no breaks in the rhythm unless they are planned.
21. Consider the knowledge base of your audience (cultural knowledge, familiarity with storytelling) and don’t assume they will react the way you wish.
22. Remember the words of Ruth Sawyer (1966), “To be able

to create a story, to make it live during the moment of the telling, to arouse emotions—wonder, laughter, joy, amazement—this is the only goal a storyteller may have” (148).

Storytelling is a wonderful way to share the rich emotions of life. It allows adults to connect with children in personal and powerful ways, building a sense of trust and community between the performer and the audience. To become the best storyteller you can be, read voraciously, practice thoughtfully, and then share your stories with childlike abandon. If you love your story and tell it as though it were happening to you and around you at that moment,

it will leap to life in the minds of your listeners. As children hear these tales and experience their power, they may internalize some of the deeper, symbolic resonances in them—the archetypes—that have helped these stories endure for centuries. Perhaps then they will also remember them and want to share this part of their human heritage with others.

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