

Chennai Storytelling Festival 2015 (4-15 Feb) was themed, "Storytelling for Teaching and Training". This essay presents some of the ideas generated in relation to this Festival.

## "Ways Storytelling can be used for Teaching-and-Learning"

The culture of India features a strong awareness of the educational value of storytelling. The frame-story within which the animal fables of the Panchatantra are related communicates this awareness clearly:

Once there was a king who had three sons. These princes seemed dull. They were unable to learn by conventional educational methods. Their father, the king, was very anxious about their futures, and thus also about the future of the kingdom. Finally, an aged scholar named Vishnu Sharma was called upon. He promised to help the princes become intelligent and bright within six months. His method: he would tell stories to the princes, and draw them into discussions about the stories. Sure enough, after six months, his plan succeeded.

The Panchatantra is one of the most popular collections of animal fables in the world. These stories, along with the Jataka Tales (which illustrate principles of Buddhism), episodes from epics, and folktales in general -- also known as Grandmother Stories -- help to make India one of the richest story and storytelling centres in the world. This is a resource the rest of the world calls upon.

### Teaching-and-Learning with Storytelling

So, how exactly can story, storytelling, and "storying" (which means, *thinking about stories*) be used for teaching-and-learning?

Any topic can be presented in story form. This can make the material more touching and memorable.

History, for example, is often taught in terms of great events, their dates and locations, and the names of the people involved. Or, it may be taught in terms of economic, sociological, or cultural factors. Potential learners may find these approaches to be "dry".

Teaching with stories may involve finding or composing characters that embody facts and abstract ideas. If listeners can relate to these characters and their adventures, the listeners tend to pay attention to the story, think about the issues the story raises, and absorb and retain the information the story contains.

Regardless of whether a story's characters may be humans, animals, divinities, aliens, etc -- all stories are about situations. Participants in storytelling events -- both tellers and listeners -- may project themselves into story characters, and imagine themselves in story situations. The participants may find reflections of themselves in stories.

Participants can consider if they might do things the same or differently from how the story characters are doing things. This gives the participants imaginative practice for living their own lives.

Learning often involves starting with what is known, and then using what one knows to also come to understand that which had previously been unknown. This may occur through the use of communication devices such as a "simile" (*this is like that*), or a "metaphor" (*this represents that*).

Storying can offer a window to the past and to the future -- while it also always presents options for behaviour in the present. Storying can help participants to understand and empathise with other individuals and cultures. In the storying process, connections and understandings are formed, both within and between people.

Stimulation of the imagination may assist participants to develop "metaphoric fluency", which involves finding similarities between things, and making connections between the self and the outside world. Upon hearing stories, similar experiences from their own lives often spontaneously come to listeners' minds.

Types of stories that can be used for teaching-and-learning include:

- 1) Traditional stories (folktales, epics, legends, myths, etc).
- 2) Experiences from everyday life (and other true, historical stories).
- 3) Original creative stories.

Curriculums may sometimes seem to have little connection with students' lives. For the sake of student engagement and involvement, it may at times be useful to have students explore their own experiences -- including their experiences of family, neighborhood, social, and professional groups. Through this kind of storytelling, students can represent and interpret the realities they experience. Storytelling can thus connect learning to life. This validates the experiences and emotions of students' lives, and also helps them to think about these things. In this way, self-knowledge and localised education can occur.

All of the above may enliven the delivery and experience of curriculum material.

In the balance of this essay, ways people engage in the storytelling process, and ways this may help them develop, are reviewed.

### Visualising Images, Recognising Patterns, Developing a Sense of Story, and Finding Meaning in Experience

A storyteller has an inner vision of story events, and communicates this vision to listeners.

Each listener in turn composes a unique set of pictures in his/her mind while hearing a story. Then, effortlessly, each listener blends these pictures into a meaningful whole.

A story can be defined as, *a series of connected events*. One way we humans make sense out of experience is to organise experience into stories. Through storying, people develop a "sense of story".

Adults may take it for granted that in stories -- as well as in everyday life -- one thing may lead to another, occurrences may be connected, and actions have consequences. But children have to learn this -- and one way they can learn it is through storying.

When telling personal-experience stories, one often feels one is just remembering what happened. But in fact, one is also often in the process making sense out of what happened. Through storying, we may come to terms with the world, and may harmonise our lives with larger realities.

By reframing and telling about difficult experiences, individuals and societies can overcome trauma, and heal.

Storying gets children in the habit of organising data into sequences that progress from a beginning, to a middle, to an end -- and hold together cohesively as a unit, a unit that has significance and meaning. The components of these units "add up to something". This helps children to "put things together" -- to make sense out of experience, in story and in life.

Storying helps children to recognise patterns of behaviors and actions. This familiarity helps them to recognise unfolding situations, and to predict upcoming developments.

Children can be encouraged to think about "turning points" in stories. This may lead them to consider what characters do, and what they could have done.

In the process, children may become increasingly able to apply the meaning of stories to their own lives. Children may "negotiate the meaning" of a story, and may "take a story to heart".

Storying enables listeners to face and consider a variety of situations, and to become aware of, and to get a grasp on, their emotions. Story elements can be embodiments of vague, amorphous ideals, ideas, and emotions (fears, hopes, etc).

Children first become able to tell stories when they acquire -- in the context of relationships -- the ability to verbalize their experiences. We use stories to shape and reshape our lives, to imagine what could have or should have happened, to review what actually has happened, and to express hopes and fears about what might happen -- and to share all of this with others.

Sensory experience is heightened in storytelling, as all senses may be referred to: taste, touch, smell, hearing, and seeing. The ability to articulate one's own and others' feelings, emotions, is also developed.

Through storying, memory can be enhanced and attention spans can be expanded. Listeners also encounter new language patterns (grammar), and vocabulary through story.

In summary: Order can be brought to listeners' worlds through the use of these imagining and thinking skills: Visualisation. Pattern recognition (involving the ability to predict how situations may develop, both in story and in life). Decision-making. Meaning-making.

### Developing a Sense of Self

Storying can help one develop one's self, or, a sense of one's self.

One way a person may develop his/her self is by conducting an internal imaginary dialogue with the teller/author of a story, and with the characters of the story. Each step of the way, a listener considers how the characters are behaving, and how the story is being presented.

Listeners are exposed to ways of handling situations, and types of characters and personality traits. They can think about possible ways to solve problems. They can think about what kind of person they themselves are, and might like to be. Storying can help listeners make thoughtful decisions about their futures.

By exploring story territory, tellers and listeners explore the world and their reactions to the world. Through storying, finally, we explore ourselves.

Today royalty is rare. However, royalty persists in the realm of traditional stories. As a symbol, a metaphor, royalty can represent fulfilling one's self, achieving one's potential, gaining self-awareness and self-knowledge, and mastering one's desires and impulses -- thus, having a good deal of control over one's self and destiny. A king, queen, prince, or princess can represent one who has a strong self -- a self that is not just buffeted by circumstances, and does not just react blindly and automatically to provoking and challenging circumstances.

### From Orality to Literacy

Telling and listening to stories provide a foundation upon which future teaching-and-learning may occur. Once he/she is confident about basic vocabulary and grammatical structures, a person may feel confident enough to try this out "on paper", through reading and writing. The person's oral cultural capacities are what makes engagement with reading and writing possible and meaningful. This is how literacy is achieved.

Having become adept at visualising as they listen to oral stories, people carry this visualising over into reading. Likewise, people call on their understanding of patterns of oral stories as they begin to read written stories.

Once they have become skilled at orally articulating personal experiences, they may be confident and enthusiastic enough to also try "writing down" these experiences.

Having children take turns telling stories of any kind to each other is an excellent way to help them rehearse before attempting to write down a story.

### The Process of Storytelling

Storytelling can be defined as, *using one's voice and body to relate a story to one or more listeners*. Of course, there are many other ways to present stories. When telling a story, one may use facial expressions, gestures, other body language, and a variety of tones of voice, to get a story across. One needs to decide what details, and what dramatic effects, to include or exclude. These are all decisions regarding editing and arrangement, for the sakes of clarity and beauty.

When people practice storytelling, their fear of public speaking is often reduced.

Storytelling can help students to not only address others, but also to listen and respond to others, enhancing these vital skills of communication and team-work.

### The Storytelling Revival

Here in the year 2015, oral storytelling is regaining a position of respect in human society.

As video-chatting (video-conferencing) is beginning to come into its own, it is becoming increasingly clear that technology will be facilitating storytelling to continue

to be central to human communication. This is so especially regarding everyday conversational storytelling -- about what one did this morning and what one hopes to do this afternoon; and about how one's life is going in general.

Schools and colleges are gradually giving curriculum space to storytelling, and are incorporating storying as a curriculum-wide, and all-technology, teaching-and-learning technique.

*This essay was composed by Dr Eric Miller, Director, World Storytelling Institute and Chennai Storytelling Festival. Dr Eric is a member of the Chennai Storytellers, and he thanks members of this group for their input regarding the essay.*

### Further Readings

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