

THE TEACHING POWER OF STORIES

Eve and Kevin Kennedy-Spaen

Every culture has a tradition of oral storytelling. The 35,000-year-old paintings on the walls of the Lascaux Caves are our earliest recorded evidence of storytelling¹, and Aesop, a 6th century BC greek slave, wrote tales which even today are used to teach moral behavior to children. Stories are a means to pass on information, values, and knowledge. They provide the structure and framework through which humans sort, understand, relate and file information.² In short, through stories people learn about the world and themselves.

Throughout time, narrative has been the most natural and fundamental teaching method and it seems that any lesson begun with the phrase “once upon a time” rivets the attention and interest of students. Simply put, stories are how we learn. The progenitors of the world’s religions understood this, handing down our great myths and legends from generation to generation³. Much research is available today to validate the powerful effect storytelling has as a teaching tool and an instrument to enhance motivation, communication and interpersonal skills.

When writing his book *Story Proof: The Science Behind The Startling Power of the Story*, Kendall Haven reviewed over 350 research studies and, perhaps unsurprisingly, each study agrees that stories are an effective and efficient vehicle for teaching and motivating, and for the general communication of factual information, concepts and tacit information.⁴ Specifically, it has been shown that material not learned within the context of a story is less likely to be retained,^{5,6} whereas stories “engage us. ... and help us to understand by making the abstract concrete and accessible”⁷. The benefits of the storytelling approach to education have been found to apply in very diverse subject areas. These include teaching literacy^{8,9} mathematics,¹⁰ science¹¹ and history to children,¹² and educating professionals in such field as business¹³, nursing¹⁴ and adult education of foreign languages¹⁵ to name just a few.

Massachusetts based historian and folklorist, Merrill Kohlhofer uses storytelling to teach history to elementary children, both in schools across New England and at historic sites including the House of Seven Gables and the Peabody Essex Museums. According to Kohlhofer, “Stories can help make what might otherwise seem dry facts and boring, irrelevant events come alive for the listeners. Because the events and characters of stories help create an emotional connection with the listener, the ideas the story carries make a greater impact, and seem both more relevant and more easily remembered and understood. Listening to stories, participating in them, helps develop children’s linguistic skills – well-crafted stories both entice and challenge the listener to love language and its communicative power and serve to model verbal art.”

“I began by asking my listeners [3rd-5th graders] how many liked history – the response was pretty lukewarm. After the question and answer session with which I conclude these programs, I asked the same question – and the response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. ...stories appeal to the child’s verbal intelligence, not something that happens that often these days where we appear to be shifting to a more visual culture. Stephanie Wilkins, a longtime third and fourth grade teacher at Odyssey Day School in Wakefield, MA, relies heavily on story telling in her classroom. Stephanie describes the power of story as a teaching tool stating, “Sitting and listening doesn’t do it [educate]. If they are just presented with material, it goes in one ear and out the other. Role play and drama, with them making up their own skits and acting out the stories, helps the students learn to handle and utilize concepts. When kids get up and play a part they are going to learn and be more likely to remember.”

Odyssey Day School builds its entire curriculum on the concept of overriding themes and stories. For example, the school -wide theme last year was Milestones: The path from yesterday to tomorrow. When Stephanie’s class was studying the ancient Greeks, instead of just talking or reading about them they became part of the story. Each child researched and played a role of one of the Greek gods or goddesses. The theme was worked into all aspects of the curriculum. In science, they studied astronomy. In math, they learned about the algorithm and how the Greeks used stars to tell time, while in Art they were making sculptures and dioramas of ancient Greek Columns.

Stephanie expounds on the fact that storytelling not only enhances academic knowledge, but “fosters interrelationships between the kids. When they don’t even realize it, they are learning to step out of their own comfort zones and recognize similarities and differences in others, learning from their ideas. They learn to compliment, cooperate, communicate, plan, organize and they learn to listen. The story is not just about me presenting the material, it is a spring board for discussion for asking questions for probing further. It brings it [the teaching] full circle.”

Another place where storytelling is still growing strong and aiding the development of self-esteem, creativity, and team cooperation is at Guard Up Family Swordmanship in Burlington, MA. Guard Up runs summer camps, after-school and weekend programming based on interactive story telling and role-playing with an emphasis on teaching the values of good sportsmanship, teamwork, compassion, honor and courage. Guard Up really brings the story to life through role-playing which is a means of merging the power of stories with the benefits of

active learning¹⁷. Children of all ages are fully immersed in medieval fantasy stories designed to entertain and educate. The story lines change and adapt based on the behavior of and choices made by the kids. The broad story arcs are planned in advance by a team of counsellors, and evolve daily. Campers, as a group, devise strategies, find solutions, and choose their course of action whether defending their city from an invasion of living puppets, or negotiating a peace agreement with a horde of scurvy pirates.

We interviewed four of the Guard Up counselors, Chris, Lauren, Hannah and Joseph, to find out what inspired them, how they utilize the stories as a tool to impart knowledge and some of the surprising paths the stories took based on the actions of the campers, or Heros, as they are called. They recognize that storytelling is a co-creative process. Although there is a general story arc the counselors know the importance of letting the plot flow in the direction that the kids take. As Joseph explains, "We can't plan the specific details because it depends on the decisions of the kids. We change the plot based on what the characters are doing." Lauren agrees "You want to take it where they take it. You don't want to be so stuck to the plot. You want them to figure it out and feel excited." Guard up gives the kids the opportunity to design their own reality or as Joseph put "the kids get to live their dreams". They design their characters and have a chance to be who they want to be and try out new things. Many of them choose positive attributes and get rewarded for playing them. On the other hand, if a camper decides to, say, fight her own team mates, she learns consequences within the game which makes her not want to do it in the future.

The motto of Guard Up is "courage, honor and compassion." Chris, another Guard Up instructor describes how the heros are given many opportunities to choose to display these attributes, such as the option to help other people without getting anything for themselves. Once, for example, when a village was attacked by monsters, the campers stayed by the side of a shopkeeper, protecting her and even giving her their own healing potions when she was injured. When recollecting this tale, Hannah reflects that "these are the real teaching moments".

Whether participating in adventure at the summer camp, after-school programs, or weekly classes and activities, the children are, as Lauren says, "learning without even knowing they are doing it". Some knowledge is applicable in the academic sense, for example they learned basic anatomy during a quest to reassemble the body of their village's mayor - including his nervous system - or utilized mathematics and deductive logic to answer riddles, figure out clues and solve puzzles. Additionally, history is incorporated both through mythology and true historical figures and settings.

Beyond gaining academic knowledge, they are also learning about themselves, social interaction, values and morals. Getting to be the hero they always wanted to be helps them gain confidence. The emphasis on honor, courage and compassion flows through all of the activities. For instance, when they were on the quest to "re-assemble the mayor" they needed to prove they were true of heart before they could retrieve the heart. As Hannah so aptly put it, "We teach kids social skills by letting them explore outlandish possibilities. They find the boundaries of their personality in a safe environment". They learn how to work together, negotiate, treat others with compassion, and attempt to solve issues through analytic skills instead of aggression. It also gives them a chance to express their emotions, creativity and imagination.

When we first interviewed the campers, many stated that the characters they designed were more creative than they, themselves were. When shown the paradox that they had designed their characters and that all of the character's actions were coming from their own minds, one camper, Connor, stated enthusiastically, "If you come here I bet you'll find out that you're more creative than you think and that you have more talent than you notice." When asked, Connor and his fellow campers, Travis, Casey and Ethan offered many different lessons learned, including:

"Sometimes, you can have the best adventures where you don't do war - do politeness first"

"Honor the game, be truthful, help others, and always try manners before violence. "

"Teamwork and thinking about problem-solving can help in the real world."

"The choices you make can really effect what goes on around you."

Storytelling, besides being perhaps the oldest method of teaching, still plays a vital role in child development. When schools are becoming focused on teaching to standardized tests, it is more important than ever that children still have a way of learning through imagination and participation. If parents are willing to look, there are still great opportunities for children to benefit from this timeless teaching method. Have you spun a story for your kids today?

Resources

Guard Up Family Swordmanship

103 Terrace Hall Ave
Burlington, MA 01803
(781) 270-4800
<http://guardup.com/>

Odyssey Day School

11 Paul Avenue
Wakefield, MA 01880-2604
(781) 245-6050
<http://www.odysseydayschool.org/>

Professional Story Tellers

Merrill Kohlhofer
<http://www.merrillstories.com/>

Laura Packard
<http://www.laurapacker.com/lp/>

Storytelling websites

<http://www.storyteller.net/>

<http://www.courses.unt.edu/efiga/STORYTELLING/StorytellingWebsites.htm>

<http://www.storyconnection.net/?content=links>

<http://www.prattlibrary.org/home/storyIndex.aspx>

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