

Storytelling and story-making

The idea of story-making was initially developed with my colleague, Mary Rose, through a teacher research project based at the International Learning and Research Centre in South Gloucestershire, funded by what was known as the DFES *Innovations* unit. We explored the use of storytelling as a tool for helping children build up a bank of narrative patterns that they could then call upon when they wish to create their own stories.

Over time, local authorities (LAs) and clusters of schools have found that story-making is a powerful strategy for both improving boys' writing and helping children who struggle with literacy to gain success. It is also a powerful strategy for children for whom English is an additional language because it enables them to build on their knowledge of storytelling in their first language and supports the development of the additional language. The new narrative progression attached to the Primary Framework for literacy identifies the progression in narrative writing alongside storytelling.

The idea is quite simple. The first stage is for children each year to learn to tell orally a bank of stories, for example, *The Gingerbread Man* in Reception and then another ten in Year 1. This means that they enter Year 2, knowing up to 20 stories. Thereafter they might work with one story every half-term, therefore acquiring a bank of about 50 stories across the primary years. These stories would come from the wide range of cultures in our diverse society.

Children internalise:

- 'big' patterns that are revisited, such as 'quest' or 'journey' stories – in this way basic plots can act as blueprints for the imagination. As Samuel Johnson said: '*The same images, with very little variation, have served all the authors who have ever written.*'
- the building blocks of narrative – common characters, settings, events, the rise and fall of narrative patterning
- the flow of sentences, the syntactical patterns
- the vocabulary – especially, connectives that link and structure narrative such as: *once upon a time, one day, so, next, but, finally*

Most importantly, they develop an imaginative world of images that can be drawn upon and day-dreamed about to invent new stories.

The stories are taught in a multi-sensory manner. Actions are used to make the tales, especially the key connectives, memorable. Each story has a story map or board as a visual reminder. Activities such as puppets, role-play, hot-seating and acting out are used to bring the tale alive and make it memorable. At the start of this work, most of the children in Reception classes were unable to tell a story. In our sample group, only two per cent of Reception children were able to retell a whole story. By the end of the year, 76 per cent of the children were able to retell a whole story with 100 per cent able to retell a good chunk.

The story-making process

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| IMITATION – familiarisation Retelling a story until it can be told fluently Multi-sensory approach, made memorable |
| INNOVATION – adapting a well-known tale Substitution, addition, alteration, change of viewpoint and reusing the basic story pattern |
| INVENTION – creating your own new story Building up a story – drawing, drama, images, video, first-hand experience, location, quality reading, etc. |

Imitation – familiarisation

Listen – join in – retell.

Communal retelling involves everyone saying the same words in the same way we might learn a song together. Through constant repetition, the children end up knowing the story by heart. This is crucial for young children, those new to the English language as well as older pupils who have missed out on internalising narrative patterns. It is great fun, provides a genuine sense of accomplishment and is inclusive. It also helps children make progress.

Initially, retelling happens as a whole class, followed by story circles and then with partners. The teacher gradually withdraws so that in the end the children can retell the tale on their own. Move to group retellings only when the class can chant it without the teacher dominating the retelling. It is a movement from dependence to independence. If stories can be taped or taught to parents by the children then families may become involved.

As children develop competency in story-making and internalise narrative patterns, stories do not have to be learned word for word. Competent storytellers can launch straight into independent retelling with their own innovations. They can listen to a story several times, draw a map and work in pairs, taking turns, to develop a retelling. They will need to retell the story a number of times to refine the tale and gain fluency.

Making a story memorable.

Comprehension – you may wish to carry out a range of comprehension activities such as 'book-talk', response, close reading and DARTs activities.

When the children know the story well, it may be appropriate to show them a written version of the story. One boy surprised himself by being able to reread a story that previously he had not been able to tackle at all!

Drama helps children get to know the text really well – often having to listen again to and reuse parts of the text. With older children, drama activities are especially useful for encouraging a return to the original text to internalise the patterns and interpretation. Also, drama can help children begin to generate new ideas for their own writing.

Writing in role – if you want the children to write in role, or create something new, then it may be worth combining drama or storytelling with drawing, plus an opportunity to retell so that ideas and language can be refined/revised.

Making the story memorable – if you are retelling *The Magic Porridge Pot* – then bring in a magic pot, cook porridge.... If you are retelling *Red Riding Hood* then bring in a red cloak. If you are retelling *Handa's surprise*, bring in the fruits and have animal masks. The more a story is recreated and represented in different forms, the more likely it is to live as a memorable metaphor in children's minds. A flimsy relationship with a story will leave only the vaguest of traces in their imaginations. Bring stories alive. As educationalists we are interested in how storytelling might help children cumulatively acquire language and influence writing – but we must not lose sight of the idea that stories are experiences – not just vehicles for learning language or the passing on of information.

Read as a writer – through problem-solving the text. 'I suspect many writers read books the way mechanics look at cars, with an eye to what is going on under the bonnet.' (Paul Muldoon)
Looking at stories with a writerly eye can help children to become more aware of structures and strategies that writers use to create different effects.

Using the writing journal – identify the overall pattern or structure, the language features and other writerly tips and hints. These can be logged on wall charts or examples collected in a writing journal which acts as a storehouse of all the useful things that they have been taught that might be referred to when writing – a sort of writing thesaurus. This drives shared writing, the children's own writing and self-evaluation, as well as the teacher's marking. This provides clarity and direction. It also means that the word and sentence level work purposefully becomes about language usage to create different effects and impact.

Practise word and sentence features – orally, or on mini-whiteboards, rehearse writerly techniques, sentence features and spellings, ultimately to be used in the children's own writing.

Innovation – developing from known stories on known stories

The next step is to take a well-known story and adapt it to make it your own. There are various different changes that can be made. A simple 'substitution' might involve changing names, places or objects. Children will be familiar with many simple substitutions that build on cultural familiarity – *The runaway pancake* and *The runaway chapatti*. Adding in new scenes or extra detail is often a quite natural development. This might be simply a matter of adding in a few adjectives or embellishing the tale considerably. Alterations might be made to settings, character and key events. The story could be retold from a different viewpoint or recast as a diary, letter or news item. For instance, I once saw *The three bears* performed as a rap – and have also seen it rewritten as a 'break and entry' thriller in which the main character enters a house, steals something and is then caught by the owner!

Only move on to innovation when the story is in the long-term working memory – otherwise, the children will struggle to innovate. Each stage needs to be modelled by the teacher so that there is a whole-class innovation. This then sets the scene for the children gradually to create their own innovation.

Substitutions

This seems to be the simplest form of innovation. Many children find it simple enough to alter basic names of characters, places and objects.

Additions

This may make a second simple enough stage. The child keeps the same basic pattern and sentences. However, extra sentences are added in, embellishing the original. These might include:

- simple additions, for example, one day = one sunny day
- adding in more description
- adding in more dialogue
- adding in new characters or events
- adding in extra detail to bring scenes alive.

Alterations

An 'alteration' is a significant change that has consequences, usually altering the story in some fashion:

- altering characters, for example, so that a good character becomes greedy
- altering settings, for example, so that a character journeys through a housing estate rather than a forest
- altering events but sticking to the basic plot
- altering the plot structure, for example, the way the story opens or ends.

Change of viewpoint

The story plot is used as a basis for a retelling from a new viewpoint:

- retelling in a different form (text-type) – for example, as a letter, diary entry
- retelling from a different character's view
- retelling in a totally new setting, for example, *Little Charlie* in a city
- retelling in a different time, for example, *The three bears* in modern times
- retelling in a different genre or text-type, for example, as a letter.

Reuse the basic plot

This involves unpicking the basic plot and recycling it in a new setting with new characters and events.

Moving from telling into writing

It is worth noting that the quality of children's innovations is in direct relation to the quality of class innovation and shared writing. When turning the class innovation into writing, retell the story as you write. With younger children, write the story as it has been learned. More experienced writers may use the known version as a skeleton so that as you write the story down you can show the children how to embellish, drawing on reading and ensuring that the shared writing demonstrates progress. Use shared writing to teach:

- thinking about audience and purpose
- using key strategies, for example, gathering ideas, organising ideas, transforming plans into writing, polishing and presenting
- drawing on the told story and the reading of mentor texts – for the overall structure, sentence and word features as well as characterisation, dialogue, action, suspense, using hooks to intrigue the reader
- using the writing journal as a reference.

For younger children and weaker writers this means that when they settle down to write, they already know what they are going to say. This releases cognitive space. The children are not trying to cope with the demands of transcription at the same time as composition. Because they already know their story well, they are more motivated and will put in more effort to transcribe their story. The act of writing has been made easier because they know what they are going to say. This frees the brain so that it can concentrate on getting the story down onto the page. This is why some children make dramatic progress. Teachers need to use shared writing to encourage progress.

Writing in front of the children may be a blend of demonstration (*I'll show you*) and teacher scribing (*You have a go and I'll write it down*). In teacher scribing, the teacher challenges weak suggestions and challenges the children to draw on features and examples that will ensure progress. The aim is to keep on showing them and talking through aspects of writing so that if they then do the same sort of thing it will help them make progress. Assessment of the children's writing informs shared writing.

Older children – probably from Year 2 onwards – develop the story at the point of composition. It is important to set different story challenges within a class so some may be simply substituting while others are embellishing and altering to level 5.

The story innovation process

Tell the new story with actions.

Draw a new story map or story board.



Retell the story daily – with the children increasingly joining in while the teacher gradually withdraws.



Move on to story circles and pairs.

Once the children have internalised the story into their long-term working memory, begin innovation.

Teacher models an innovation and creates a new story map or story board.

The teacher demonstrates how to use this to retell the new version.

Class and teacher retell new version.



Teacher leads the children through creating their innovation.

Children draw their new map and retell their innovation.



Shared writing of class innovation.

Pupils write or record their own innovations.

Polishing and publishing of stories.

Developing a story

When the children know the basic story and can retell it fluently they are able to develop the actual wording. Be careful that they do not embellish a story so much that it becomes too wordy and the narrative is lost.

A simple 'story grid' or flow chart can be drawn to provide a visual overview of each 'scene' or main event. Use this to focus on:

- description – people, places, objects, creatures
- characterisation and dialogue
- suspense and action
- crafting the opening and ending.

Don't work on everything at once – just select a focus. Model ideas, to influence the class version of a story. Then ask children to work in pairs or individually. Some key points of 'writing knowledge' might include:

Characterisation

- Choose a name.
- Give a few descriptive details.
- How is the character feeling and why, for example, angry – or what type are they, perhaps bossy or shy.
- Show this through what they say or do.
- What is their desire, for example, she wants a pet.
- Develop and change character across the story.

Dialogue

- Think about how they feel.
- Use powerful speech verbs.
- Use said + adverb.
- Insert stage direction to show what a character is doing when speaking, for example, '*No,*' he *hissed, shaking his head in disgust.*
- Use only a few exchanges.

Description – people, places, objects

- Use well-chosen adjectives.
- Use similes and metaphors.
- Use senses and concrete detail.
- Show things through the character's eyes, for example, *She stared at...*
- Describe key objects.
- Describe settings to create atmosphere.
- Describe the weather and time of day.

Openings

- Character – *Bill stared at the burger in disgust.*
- Setting – *A fly crawled up the window pane.*
- Action – *Jo ran.*
- Talk – *'Put that down!'*
- Use a hook – *Usually, Jasbir enjoyed walking to school but...*

Endings

- Show character's feelings – *Marika grinned.*
- Comment on what has been learned – *They knew it had been stupid....*

Action and suspense

- Balance short and long sentences.
- Use questions to draw reader in.
- Use exclamations for impact.
- Place character in a lonely, dark place.
- Introduce an ominous sound effect, for example, *something hissed.*
- Show a glimpse of something, for example, *a hand appeared at the door.*
- Use dramatic connectives, for example, *at that moment...*
- Use empty words, for example, *something, somebody, it.*
- Use powerful verbs, for example, *run, jump, grip, grab, struggle.*

Invention – orally creating a new story

In story-making schools, children are constantly in the process of either learning a story or innovating. This is a daily ongoing process especially at Key Stage 1. But they also need to get used to making stories up from themselves, drawing on their bank of told stories as well as their lives. To do this, hold regular weekly story-inventing sessions.

These should be:

- oral
- guided by the teacher
- reusing familiar characters, settings and patterns
- reusing story language
- an opportunity for new ideas, drawing on a range of stories and life.

It is worth bearing in mind the following advice.

- Keep the stories simple – build the end in early to avoid rambling!

Capturing the story

Of course, you may wish to just make the story up and leave it at that. It might be captured in writing, with a Dictaphone or video. Or, just by drawing:

- story map – Story Mountain – story flow chart or story board.

Start from the basic story ingredients.

Begin by discussing the key questions.

- Who – build up a character.
- Where – does the story take place?
- What – will happen? Bear in mind that you will need something to go wrong – a dilemma or problem or mystery or exciting event.

If you get stuck, use a story trigger; have something happen such as a phone ringing, a new character entering, someone screaming.

Using a basic plot

Many schools have identified key plots that the children meet every year – one per half-term. In this way the children become familiar with a basic pattern that may be reused in endless permutations.

- Problems and resolutions
- Warning.
- Quest – a to b, there and back again.
- Wishing.
- Lost/found.
- Defeating the monster, for example, *Gary had never believed in trolls – or – Gary had always been afraid of being trapped in dark places.*
- Cinderella.
- Character flaw (tragedy).
- Cumulative, for example, *The very hungry caterpillar.*
- Traditional (myths, fables, etc.).

If children are building up to writing it is worth following this pattern.

- Draw your story – making decisions about what will happen.
- Use the drawing to tell the story to a partner, by word of mouth.
- Discuss the story with your partner, taking suggestions for improvement.
- Retell the story with refinements.

The more you retell aloud or in your head, the better you get to know the story, the more it can be improved.

Once the plot has developed, use story grids to work on characterisation, description, etc.

As you write the story, retell it again in your head, tweaking it where necessary.

Pie Corbett, April 2008