



Storytelling with Young People

During my thirty years of working with young people, I have found storytelling to be a powerful tool. Not only does storytelling help us discover meaning in our experiences but it gives voice and creative expression to those experiences. Storytelling empowers young people with the ability to communicate and listen effectively.

Given that many scientists believe we are 'hard-wired' for story, storytelling is an effective means for teaching academic subjects, explaining new concepts, discussing ethics, morals and values and for instilling an understanding of, and appreciation for, the cultural and historical context out of which storytelling emerges.

Why use storytelling with young people?

- Develops emotional literacy
- Develops communication & literacy skills
- Exercises active listening
- Encourages problem-solving and skills for managing conflict
- Stimulates imagination & artistic/creative expression
- Provides a tool for understanding and appreciating human experience
- Opens the door to greater understanding of others
- Empowers young people with social skills
- Boosts self-confidence and self-esteem
- Encourages appreciation of storytelling as an art form and creative means of expression
- Connects young person with personal, local/regional and cultural history

Storytelling links with *Curriculum for Excellence*

Storytellers who work with young people in schools and other educational centres should be aware of the values and expectations of the current *Curriculum for Excellence* (for more info go to www.ltscotland.org.uk) and use their imagination and creativity to link with these through the stories and activities they choose.

Areas of learning to which storytelling can be linked:

- Expressive arts
- Languages and literacy
- Health and well-being (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual)
- Mathematics and numeracy
- Religious and moral education
- Sciences & technology
- Social studies
- Personal and social development

Storytelling Activities and Exercises

What follows are some activities and ideas which I've used with young people. Please feel free to use and experiment with them. Before working with a group of young people, I recommend negotiating with them a set of group agreements which will guide your working together. Issues of confidentiality, trust, respect and support should be discussed.

Fire-starters – Scottish storyteller David Campbell reminds us of our responsibility to 'awaken' listeners in our storytelling sessions. He suggests that we design our workshops and performances with activities that awaken the body, the mind, the heart, the voice and the spirit.

Body – physical activities and movement games: stretching, shaking, jumping, running on the spot, yoga, tai chi exercises, relaxation exercises etc.

Mind – riddles, puzzles, jokes

Heart – short emotional stories, poems

Voice – songs, chants, speeches, poetry recitation, tongue-twisters

Spirit – sitting in silence, meditation, breathing and relaxation exercises

Understanding Stories

It's important that young people understand and appreciate what stories are. Depending on the age of the children and the time available, take a little time to explain the concept of stories, that they usually have a structure (beginning, middle and end), hero, challenges, helpers, resolutions and so on; that stories help explain and give meaning to our experiences; that there are different types of story (e.g. fables, myths, legends, fairy tales, urban legends, tall tales, etc.)

Share a story from your repertoire. Young people love to hear stories and need them every bit as much as children do. I've told stories to teenagers who, according to their teachers, had very limited attentions spans, yet even after 30 minutes were thirsty for more. Young people also particularly enjoy personal tales but beware of what you share. Do not use stories simply to unburden yourself of personal anecdotes and unnecessarily expose yourself. Ensure that you have worked through these experiences and have transformed them into tales with universal meaning.

Storytelling Games

There are numerous games which can be used during a storytelling session, and the internet is a good place to locate such resources under the headings 'storytelling games', 'camp games', 'ice-breakers' or 'team-building activities'. The aim of these games is to enliven participants, to reduce anxiety and provide an opportunity for laughter and vocalisation. The games challenge but do not threaten. Respect participants' right not to take part if they are feeling uncomfortable. Usually, they will re-join once a level of trust has been established. Such games also introduce basic storytelling skills and help young people better understand and appreciate the elements of a story. They also encourage them to find their own voice and to experience that storytelling is fun as well as instructive.

The story of my name – during introductions, invite each person to share the story of their name.

Unfortunately, fortunately – this game offers everyone a chance to be heard and to contribute to a story. The results are funny and often ludicrous but contain the basic elements of storytelling: setting, character, action and reaction, challenges and resolution. The storyteller begins by improvising a story with 'Once upon a time there was...' He/She introduces a character, setting and an action before ending his/her sentence with 'but unfortunately'. At this point she/he passes the story to the next person in the circle who continues the story for another couple of sentences before ending with 'but unfortunately' and passing on to the next person and so on around the circle until it comes back to the storyteller who can either end it or send it around the circle again. Of course, if anyone gets stuck or feels uncomfortable they can simply say 'Pass' and the story moves on to the next person. In order to gain the trust and confidence of the group, it's important that the storyteller does not judge or interpret the story or the tellers.

Variations: You can experiment with the game by substituting 'but fortunately' or alternate the two phrases.

Story swap – I often make room for a 'storytelling slot' at the beginning of a session, during which young people are invited to swap stories, jokes, riddles or songs. This activity, I remind them, is part of the ceilidh culture at the root of storytelling, particularly in Scotland.

If necessary, you can frame these sessions by posing themes such as *What was the most embarrassing thing to happen to you?* or *Tell us about your first day of school* or *How did you get your name?* The possibilities are endless. Again, the purpose is to reduce anxiety, boost self-confidence and create a level of trust in which storytelling can flourish. Working in pairs, participants can simply begin by telling each other a story they remember from childhood or from their reading or watching television/film.

The old home place – invite young people to take their audience on a narrative journey through their home, stopping along the way to share anecdotes about each room or people or objects within. Afterwards, create maps of their home and neighbourhood and see if these help stimulate further stories.

My perfect day – participants create a story of their 'perfect' day or night. It might be a birthday, a vacation, a date or other event.

Story box – from a box of objects, invite participants to choose one and make up a story about it. Similarly, photographs can be used.

Past, present and future – if you can get outdoors, invite participants to go out and choose a small object from nature (a stone, leaf, twig, plant, flower, pine cone etc.). Share with a partner the story of this object beginning with its past, then its present and finally its future.

Telling the journey: storytelling and storyboards – many stories are based on a journey (Joseph Campbell's work on the 'heroic quest' is useful here.) Invite participants to tell the story of how they arrived at school (or wherever you are meeting). Discover the beginning, middle and end (or basic structure) of the story. Each person is invited to share their story with a partner.

In the first instance, you just want the facts - from the time you woke up until your arrival. Then, encourage the storytellers to identify a challenge that had to be overcome. If one does not present itself, invite the storyteller to invent one. On the second telling of the story, include this challenge and exaggerate any one feature of the story (thus adding a comic touch). Participants can make notes if they wish but encourage them to trust their memories. Add an artistic element to the activity by providing 6-panel storyboards in which participants draw the main scenes of their story. Reassure them that drawing ability is not important; stick people can tell a story.

Once drawn, add speech bubbles where it helps tell the story. Remind participants how drawing and text complement one another. Invite participants to choose two or three colours that help create the emotions that complement the story. Complete storyboards with titles and display on a wall. Compare with graphic comics and novels they might have read.

Healing stories – I used the following exercise while working with young adults in Israel and Palestine. It is a therapeutic exercise and should only be undertaken if you have the confidence to work in such a way. The questions or themes which you use will depend in large part on the needs of the audience. You should consult first with them on the choice of question or theme. In this example, participants were asked to think about when they first 'awoke' to the conflict in the Holy Land.

In pairs, each person takes a short period of time to share a story of when he/she first 'awoke' to the conflict between Arabs and Jews/Palestinians and Israelis. Secondly, each partner retells the story back to the story's owner. Finally, working together, the pair construct a new story using elements from both stories they have told and heard. These can be shared in the group. Afterwards, participants are asked what it was like to tell their story,

listen to their story being told by someone else (as well as listen to the other's story) and, finally, to create a new story with their partner.

This is a simple, yet powerful, exercise and can elicit strong emotions. It is important that a safe space and level of trust have been created to hold such work.

What kind of stories work with young people?

Your choice of stories will be guided by the needs of the young people and/or the people who work with them. For one particular project, my colleague and I were asked to address the issue of violent revenge within a community. By choosing stories that offered alternatives to revenge, we were able to introduce the young people to different ways of managing conflict. In another, low self-esteem and literacy skills were introduced via storytelling and comic book heroes. After inventing their own 'super-hero', participants went on to tell stories based in part on their personal experiences. These were drawn up using simple storyboards in comic book fashion.

Good stories also contain within them the seeds for **discussion and enquiry**, thus opening up an opportunity for young people to share their experiences and listen to one another. In Kay Stone's *The Curious Girl*, for example, questions are raised regarding parental authority, inquisitiveness, identity and the struggle to find one's own voice. One can begin by asking young people to identify with particular characters in a story and explore the character's motivation, feelings, behaviour and decision-making. *Do you agree with what the character did here or there? Why do you think the character made this decision? How would you feel if you were that character?* and so on.

Stories featuring heroes who have to overcome **challenges and obstacles** are useful. When asked to work with a group of disadvantaged young people, I was informed that they had requested me to tell 'Snow White'. Initially, I thought they were too old for such a story (ranging in age from 17 to 24) but it seemed they had all enjoyed the Disney film as children. I was also informed by a staff member that the young people's attention span was about 10 minutes.

My version of 'Snow White' (from the Grimm's collection) took about 25 mins to tell. I was warned that they would not sit still and would likely leave or interrupt the session before I finished. Nevertheless, I was confident that this traditional tale would offer enough nourishment to hold them. Indeed, this group of seven young people sat enraptured throughout. The oldest young man (reputedly with the shortest attention span) was not only amazed that I could tell a story without a book, but surprised all of us at the end of 'Snow White' when he immediately requested another story. I am convinced that despite growing up on a diet of television, films and video games, young people are still hungry for good stories.

This particular group took the 'Snow White' story, adapted its structure and motifs and wove their own experience of growing up in Leith around it. A few days later, they had created an artistic telling of their own, set in Edinburgh, with their own characters and a comical plot

that still bore the main elements of the traditional tale. They fashioned a scenic paper backdrop, cut out paper characters, attached them to lolly sticks and acted their story in front of a video camera. Snow White's journey and the cast of stepmother, dwarves and others had appealed to them. In her dilemma they found parallels with their own lives. The story 'fed' them with the elements and confidence to transform, and find meaning in, their own experiences.

Again, the internet is a rich resource for stories. The website www.story-lovers.com/listsofstories.html is a treasure trove of stories arranged thematically.

Closing: Reflection and Relaxation

It's important that young people are given time to reflect on their experience and share the thoughts and feelings that a storytelling session has stimulated. Try to build in time for thoughtful reflection and group discussion. Ask questions that encourage reflection and stimulate deeper discussion. I recommend sitting in a circle to do this. However, you might want to begin reflections in pairs or small groups before coming back to the circle to share.

Deep Relaxation and Visualisation - Finally, I often introduce - where time and space permit - a deep relaxation and visualisation exercise. This involves inviting young people to relax by lying on the floor and using their imaginations to visualise a peaceful setting. It is very important that you are confident about leading such an exercise and I recommend that you only do so in the company of a co-facilitator. You should also ensure that you have explained your methods to the teachers or carers in charge and that you have their support. Do not attempt such work if you feel the least bit uncomfortable.

Participants lay on their backs on the - ideally, carpeted - floor (mats, blankets or towels are useful), arms at their sides, palms up or down. It's important too that participants don't lie too close to one another and space themselves so as not to be distracted by the others.

Invite the body and mind to relax. Take time to become aware of any tension in their body. Next, take a deep breath and hold it, while tensing up your muscles from head to toe. Hold this tension as long as is comfortable before exhaling and allowing your body to relax into the floor. Repeat 2 or 3 times more, each time becoming aware of any remaining tension in the body. Prompt participants by suggesting areas of their body on which to focus: feet, ankles, calves, thighs, pelvic region, bum muscles, back, shoulders, arms, hands, stomach, chest, neck, face, jaw and mouth. Invite participants to do the exercise without your prompting, in silence.

Next, invite them to close their eyes or focus on a spot on the ceiling above them. During the next sequence, I weave in a visualisation story during which I invite them to imagine a relaxing place in nature where they can go to be nourished. Take time to allow them to create/remember and experience this place. Prompt their senses by asking them to take note of what they see, hear, taste, touch and smell. What do they feel? Offer reassuring reminders that this place offers them safety, strength, encouragement and nourishment.

As their imaginary story unfolds, I suggest that they look for a special gift left for them and encourage them to explore its qualities. What does it offer them? Suggest that they can bring this gift with them into their daily lives. After 10 minutes or so, suggest that they prepare to return from their special place. Invite them to say goodbye for now, but remind them that they can return here at anytime they choose. Ask them to imagine making their way back along the path that will lead them to the room and your voice.

Suggest that they slowly awaken by wiggling their toes and fingers. They can then gently rock their bodies and get up by rolling onto their sides before rising. Try to maintain the silence as they rise and gather their thoughts. Check that everyone is feeling ok...it is not unusual to feel slightly dizzy or cool upon rising. These feelings should pass momentarily.

Deep relaxations and visualisations can have a potent effect on young people. Following such sessions, teachers have reported to me how much calmer, focused and well-behaved their young people have been. There are numerous variations on visualisation including more story-led exercises during which participants take an imaginary journey into a forest or along a beach. Choose these carefully and ensure that you are absolutely confident of leading such an exercise.

Conclusion

Storytelling is a powerful tool when working with young people. Storytelling can empower young people with the confidence to tell and listen to their own (and other's) stories. It is a way of helping young people understand and express themselves and as such is a powerful literacy (including emotional literacy) tool. Storytelling is entertaining, informative, instructive and inspiring. It can help young people explore the range of human emotions and actions while providing an important objective stance from which they can observe, analyse and evaluate. Stories are both a mirror and a window onto what it means to be human.

Resources

By no means exhaustive or authoritative, these are just a few of the many resources with a focus on storytelling for young people:

De Vos, Gail, *Storytelling for Young Adults: A Guide to Tales for Teens*
Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003

De Vos, Gail, *Tales, Then and Now: More Folktales as Literary Fictions for Young Adults*
Libraries Unlimited, 2001

Hamilton, Martha, and Weiss, Mitch, *Children Tell Stories: A Teaching Guide*

Owen Publishers, 1990

Mooney, William, and Holt, David, *The Storyteller's Guide: Storytellers Share Advice for the Classroom, Boardroom, Showroom, Podium, Pulpit, and Center Stage*
August House, 1996

Sawyer, Ruth, *The Way of the Storyteller*, Viking Press, 1962

Websites

Brother Wolf, 'The Art of Storytelling with Children Show,'
www.storytellingwithchildren.com/2008/06/02/dovie-thomason-building-young-adult-audiences

– lots of podcasts on storytelling with children and young adults

Max Tell, 'Storytelling for the Young Adult Classroom,'

www.maxtell.ca/content/node/17

– useful advice from a seasoned storyteller

Story Lovers, www.story-lovers.com/listsbibliographycore.html

– an extensive resource and bibliography of stories and books about stories and more