C H A P T E R   O N E

Using the Story Form

Meeting Objectives by Engaging Feelings

Teaching literacy successfully requires us to engage the feelings of our students in what we want them to learn. In general, this may seem like a claim most teachers would agree with but perhaps with some hesitancy. When it comes to thinking about phonemes, comma use, or irregular plurals, engaging students' feelings in the topic might seem just a little—shall we say—optimistic, if not downright weird.

You may be wondering, then, why this book begins with a concept so seemingly improbable. I encourage you to read on, and you'll come to see that there's a good reason to deal first with feelings and emotions. But I must warn you—there's more. This approach asks you not only to engage your students' feelings, but also to find *within yourself* an emotional connection with the topic. If you have been teaching about phonemes and commas and plurals for ten years, the idea of getting emotionally turned on by such topics will perhaps seem weird indeed. But when considered for a few minutes, you might just agree that it makes perfect sense.

A routine part of the preservice education of nearly all teachers today is learning how to plan lessons and units of study—for teaching literacy no less than for any subject area. Most commonly, the teachers are instructed to begin this planning by stating their objectives for the lesson or unit: What do they aim to achieve? They are also taught methods for organizing the materials in order to effectively present the particular content to their students, directed always by their objectives. This general scheme of planning was devised in detail by Ralph Tyler in the late 1940s (Tyler, 1949) and was derived,

according to the Tanners, from the earlier work of John Dewey (Tanner & Tanner, 1980).

It obviously makes sense to have clear objectives for one's teaching. But these strategies for planning teaching were derived initially from the procedures used in industrial processes for producing washing machines and automobiles (Callahan, 1962). The process went something like this:

- Design the final product—one's objective
- Organize the assembly line to construct the product bit by bit—one's methods
- Arrange supplies of the materials along the line—one's content
- Do testing to ensure that the product functions as planned—one's evaluation

These strategies represent one of the earlier and subtler influences of the corporate and industrial world on education. While there is obviously nothing wrong with planning procedures that help teachers organize and teach curriculum material more efficiently, there is a problem if those procedures fail to take into account something vital about education.

One of the differences between producing knowledge in students and producing washing machines and automobiles in factories is that knowledge becomes part of the living minds of students. It becomes tied into the meanings students then bring to make sense of the world and of their experiences. Crucially, it becomes tied into their emotional and imaginative lives. If we want to design and plan teaching in such a way that the emotions and imagination of students are engaged, then we might be wise to consider an approach that puts these features in their proper, prominent place. Let's begin looking at some of the cognitive tools preliterate students use so that we can find alternative categories for planning teaching, from which we can construct planning frameworks to help with the job.

Stories and Feelings

When we learn to speak a language, we gain not only the words and grammar but also an array of additional tools. One of the most pervasive is the story. Wherever we find oral language use, we also find stories. What is a story? What an odd question, in that everyone

knows what a story is: It's a narrative that has a beginning that usually sets up some kind of conflict, a middle that complicates it, and an ending in which the conflict is resolved. But that doesn't seem to be such a big deal—at least not big enough to explain why all human cultures have used stories, and nearly all oral cultures have used them as central to their religious lives.

If we look a little deeper, we can see why stories are universally used in all human cultures and why you and I use them all the time, even when we might not recognize we are using one of the most ancient and powerful of all cultural inventions.

The Story Tool

So what kind of "tool" is the story? Well, it's the kind of tool that enables you to understand how to feel about events. Stories shape experience and knowledge into forms that can uniquely establish their emotional meaning. Stories don't simply convey information and describe events, they also shape their contents so that we will feel good or bad, joyful or sorrowful, as we hear about them. No other form of language can do this.

If I were to tell you about Anna Davidson, a generous and skilled doctor, and added, "It was a hot day, and she dived into the water," you may feel a small pleasure for her. But when I further tell you "the water was crowded with hungry sharks," you may feel some regret or distress. The story could continue with the information that she was trying out a new shark repellant or trying to save a child who had fallen in the water. Your feelings about her diving into the water would change, depending on the subsequent events. You would know you had reached the end of the story when you knew how to feel about her diving in and about the other events. In this case, our feelings would also be significantly shaped by whether the doctor later had or was lunch.

Now think for a moment about television commercials. You know that the break for the ads comes during a show, partway through its story, when you remain in doubt about how you should feel about the events you have seen so far. Certainly there are conventional and stereotypical endings that help us know that the story is concluded, but primarily our emotions are what tell us the story has ended. That's why we can't program a computer to recognize a story as distinct from any other kind of narrative: It lacks the emotional equipment that would allow it to *feel* meaning.

Using the Story Tool in a New Way

When people write about the use of stories in teaching literacy, they most commonly refer to fictional stories and discuss the many ways that stories can be used and their great educational power. Here we bypass the use of fictional stories and literature—not because they don't matter, but because there are already many fine books about this topic. Instead, we'll focus on a different use of the story, although inevitably we'll also refer to some fictional stories.

The great power of the story, for the purposes of literacy instruction, is that it can shape content of any kind, true or fictional, into emotionally satisfying forms. When a father asks his daughter, "What's the story on the new soccer coach?" or a mother asks her son, "What's the story on the new teacher?" the parents are not asking their children to make up a fiction. They are asking them to select events from their experiences and shape them to bring out their emotional meaning, to help the parents know how to feel about the coach or the teacher. We constantly use the story form to shape events, to tell our friends about something that happened in the office or an adventure on holiday. This ability to narrate is a central human skill, and those who do it well have both a satisfying ability to clarify and sharpen meanings for themselves and important power in being able to convey information and meanings to others. This power can be greatly valued in all walks of life. It is one of the great skills of orality (the cognitive tool kit of people who live in oral cultures), and its development can lead to an enriched literacy. It is also one of the great skills that can make teachers effective in educating.

Stories in the Classroom

For teachers, stories accomplish two important things simultaneously: Stories can communicate information very clearly and effectively, and they can engage the emotions of the students in the knowledge being learned. While the more general and powerful use of the story structure in planning and teaching will be seen in Part III, here we look at some smaller-scale ways in which we can bring stories into play.

Storyfying Literacy Tasks

There are endless ways the story can be integrated into teaching literacy. We'll begin with a very general use of the story, picking up

from the idea of welcoming students to the wide community of readers and writers. Then, you'll see how even the most basic exercises can be made more meaningful and engaging by drawing on the story form.

It's helpful to start by telling students the true story of literacy itself, in which they are to become participants. The example that follows demonstrates one such way. Of course, both adults and children first coming to literacy instruction will have ideas about what literacy is and even how they will go about learning it. But few will know much about how literacy developed and reached the stage at which they will experience it.

Ms. Chou's Kindergarten Class

Ms. Chou started a kindergarten class in a very multiethnic neighborhood by talking about how people began writing as a way to keep a record of quantities. They would make an icon for one barrel, sack, or sheep, and two of the icons for two, and so on. Ms. Chou introduced the word *icon* and drew some examples on the board. The children seemed to grasp the concept easily, perhaps because of their exposure to computer icons.

The teacher then said she had made a different icon for each student in the class. She had drawn round bodies with stick arms and legs on the board, one for each child, in bright yellow, and had written the children's names under them. She then suggested that this system maybe wasn't such a good idea to help count. Because there were so many drawings to count, it would be just as easy to count the children each time anyone wanted to know how many there were. She then told them that long, long ago, people did make drawings like this on slates so they would know how many sheep they had. They could check days later to see whether they had lost any sheep or whether one might have been stolen.

Ms. Chou invented a shepherd named Tom who was worried he was losing sheep from his flock. Ms. Chou drew a very simple representation of a sheep:
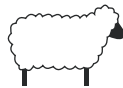
She told the children that Tom got some slates and drew an icon like this for each sheep, all twenty of them.
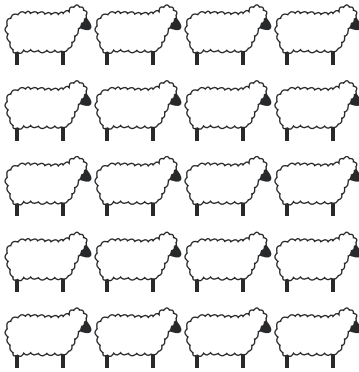
By the time Tom had finished drawing, he had lots of slates, and it was quite a task to make sure he was keeping an accurate match of the number of real sheep against the number of sheep icons. Then, Ms. Chou explained, Tom's daughter, Mary, suggested that instead of making an icon for each sheep, he should make the icon and then put next to it a simpler *index mark* for each sheep—the index was a simple line, which she drew next to her sheep icon. So the daughter showed her father that he could have a sheep icon with twenty lines next to it, one for each sheep, and he could fit it all easily on a single slate.

The children all agreed that this was much more sensible.

During the rest of the class the children seemed spellbound as Ms. Chou described the next ingenious step, when the daughter told her father about a new system that she had heard about. This was the invention of using *symbols* for numbers. These symbols would replace the index marks. Ms. Chou showed how the daughter taught her father about this even easier way of keeping a record of how many sheep there were. She wrote "2" and "0" to replace the twenty index lines. So it became possible to record quantities of objects quite compactly in writing.

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The class went at a slower pace than suggested here, of course. But by the end, when Ms. Chou asked the children whether they'd like to learn the symbols that Mary taught her father, the children were all eager to learn this neat trick, knowing of course that it was a trick every adult had learned how to use.

Ms. Chou didn't need to make up a complicated story in order to personalize the ingenuity involved in counting systems. After all, individual people long ago did invent these progressively more complex yet also more simple and effective tools for counting objects. Her simplified account of the historical development helped get over a common problem: many nonliterates assume that each word represents a thing. You can see this assumption among children learning to read today. If the teacher writes "Three little sheep," tells the children what the writing says, then rubs out one of the words and asks what the writing says now, many children will spontaneously say "Two little sheep" because two words are left on the board (Olson, 1994).

The remarkable story of literacy can be told in all its intriguing ingenuity in a manner that is easily engaging to students. The purpose of the story-form is to connect students' emotional commitment to that ingenuity and for them to see themselves as becoming a part of this remarkable adventure. (The foregoing example is extended in a later chapter to show how to use such an elaborated story to engage students' imaginations in literacy in general.)

But this is just using story as a general introduction. We can use it equally effectively for the simplest and most detailed practical activities. The stories we create do not need to be riveting, knuckle-whitening thrillers but, rather, can be quite simple accounts of people engaged in everyday activities. Obviously, the more entertaining we can make the stories, the better.

Mr. Rodda's Adult Literacy Class

Mr. Rodda wanted to show his class of adult literacy learners how to form plurals. Usually, teaching basic word features is taught mechanically, but it requires only a little thought to recast those activities into stories. Instead of simply giving the learners a list of singular words and asking them to write the plural forms, Mr. Rodda took a list of singulars and wrote them into a brief story. The students were then asked to recast the story using plurals. In Mr. Rodda's class, the word list included *woman*, *stone*, *my*, *he*, *I*, *boy*, *pencil*, *brother*, *paper*, *friend*, and *plant*.

Instead of putting the words in a column, with a blank space in which to write the plural, Mr. Rodda wrote a story in which he underlined the words he wanted the students to write in the plural. He asked them to write out the story again with plurals where he had underlined the singulars.

A woman went down to the river to get some water for a plant that looked too dry. A boy sat on a stone with a pencil and paper. The woman asked the boy what he was doing. "I am writing to my brother," the boy said. "But you can't write," the woman replied. "That's all right," said the boy. "My brother can't read."

It's important to mention that when Mr. Rodda performed this activity with his class, fewer than half of the students could understand it in written form, as demonstrated. For most of the students, Mr. Rodda read the story, and the substitution of plurals was done orally.

To adapt this exercise for another literacy lesson, in which we wanted students to select from a set of words the best word to fill in blank spaces, the students might be more readily engaged if the blanks appeared in a simple story rather than in disconnected lists of sentences.

The foregoing example demonstrates one way to make a list into a story in a simple way. The form of the story used—drawing on another of the cognitive tools we'll discuss later—is the *joke.* You don't need to use jokes all the time, but they do lighten the learning load a little now and then, and our students at an adult learning centre in a Vancouver suburb certainly appreciated them. In fact, we learned that many of the students really looked forward to the classes because they knew they would hear a lot of jokes as they learned.

Much of the humor in the examples to follow, and especially in those found in the Appendix, is real "groaner" stuff. But it is exactly what really engaged our younger students, the four- and five-year-olds particularly.

Any of the routine exercises of early literacy that are usually presented by some drill method can be made more engaging and meaningful if put into a story context. Again, not *all* activities need to be story-shaped, and the challenge of inventing stories for all activities could be a little intimidating. Two points may be made with regard to this last concern:

1. With even a small amount of practice, it becomes easier to think of activities and exercises in story form. It is, after all, an older and more basic form of human thinking than almost any other we know of.

2. If these principles are found to be persuasive, no doubt many more materials will be published for teachers with story form examples.

Inventing Comic Characters

Any teacher can invent a stock comic character who has come from another country or another planet and is trying to learn about the local language and its written form. So whenever any new and complicated task is to be started in class, the comic character can be reintroduced and a story told to describe how he or she goes about learning it. Take the common English word ending, "ough." Our comic character, Bea Wildered, sees "ough" written in the word *through* and asks someone how it is pronounced. "Oo," she is told. She feels confident that she has learned this odd set of letters—until she hears someone talking about the bough of a tree. She asks how *bough* is spelled. "But that must be 'boo'!" she thinks. She is bewildered and walks towards a noisy demonstration where someone is carrying a sign saying, "We have had enough!" She wonders, "We have had 'enoo' or 'enow'?" When she asks a friend which one is right, she is told the word is pronounced "enuff." And so one can go on, with our character becoming gradually crazier as she begins to wrestle with the thor*ough*ly confusing English spelling and pronunciation, in which she still has to discover bought, cough, dough, hiccough, slough, and on and on. I have been told there is an *I Love Lucy* show in which Lucy's husband is trying to read to their son and running into just this "ough" problem.

The story here is simply a matter of having an invented character, a series of related incidents, and the character's emotional responses. One can—in cases where there is a rule or a common pattern (as in "i before e except after c")—have the character discover the rule or pattern and so avoid the punishment for misuse, whether it be as simple as humiliation or as extreme as a speedy retreat to the home planet, or whatever else the teacher and children determine. It would be important, of course, not to make the difficulties seem insurmountable!

The character can be made to suffer the same difficulties the students are to encounter and can be shown to be successful by recognizing in minor dramatic ways the particular lesson the teacher will then go on to reinforce with the students.

Personifying Elements of Language

Another option is to make the letters or phonemes become the characters in the story. Many first-grade children experience difficulty with phonemic awareness and are unable to remember that certain letters, when paired together, make a sound unlike either letter alone. The teacher could create a story to explain such anomalies. For example, one might tell a story like the following to explain the "th" sound:

> The Letters T and H don't get along very well. One day their teacher, Ms. Rules, caught the letter T sticking his tongue out at the letter H. She tried to get them to talk out their problems, but whenever they were together, one or the other was sticking his tongue out. All she could hear T saying was /th/ (as in "this"). Even H, who was usually rather quiet, started sticking his tongue out at T and saying /th/ (as in "thanks"). To this day, whenever T and H are together, they stick their tongues out at each other and behave very improperly—making sounds that sound nothing like the /t/ and /h/ sounds they are supposed to make.

After the story, the children could be asked to create an image in their minds (and possibly also on paper) of the two letters together sticking their tongues out.

Creating a Literacy Adventure

Stories can have even more imaginative and emotional engagement. One of the tricks of literacy is the recognition of words as arbitrary sounds that we have invented for our purposes. A pretend story can be set up, as Ms. Stewart did for her second-grade class, in which she and the class were explorers on a strange planet. They had discovered a weird building, and it had many rooms in it. Their job was to

determine what the building was for and to describe it for the people back on their home planet, who were excitedly following their discoveries. She drew a rough sketch on the board. They had to decide what to call it, so Ms. Stewart suggested they simply name it *école*. But what was this *école* for? Once they got inside they saw it had many divisions, each of which they decided to call a *salle*. She drew some of these *salles*. Inside each *salle* were many small, rectangular objects that were hard on the outside but then had sometimes hundreds of white sheets stacked inside. They decided to call each of these stacked up objects a *livre*.

She had also brought into class with her some odd objects that she guessed none of the children would be familiar with—a small, flat electronic machine for weighing letters or food, a Russian samovar, a pyramid clock that had ceased to work, some old English pennies, and other bits and pieces. She invited groups of students to decide what they should call these things. She wrote the names on Post-it notes and stuck them on the objects. Between each of the names they invented, she added some more information about the strange place they were discovering—for instance, the walls had invisible but still solid parts, and she called each a *fenêtre*.

Nearly all the students found it easy to remember these words while they thought they were parts of their invented language.

This lesson continued for a few classes, and Ms. Stewart gave increasing clues that she and the class were not humans and that the strange planet they were visiting was Earth, that the building was a school, and that they had learned a fair amount of French vocabulary. She also spent some time discussing the marks she had put over *école* and *fenêtre*. At one point she showed how there were a lot of words that could be given to some things that were frequently used, but there wasn't much point naming other things that weren't differentiated in use. Also she explained that an overall name was useful for things that might look different but had similar functions, but particular names were also needed for each of them, so she gave a name for "coin" and then called the big ones "pennies" and added a few "centimes."

Ms. Stewart's story had two results:

1. The children were given a sense of how names are given to things largely depending on their uses.

2. The children were delighted to discover they had been learning French.

They asked that their adventures on the strange planet Earth be continued for quite some time, especially after they had explored some *maisons* by traveling along some flat and smooth *rues*. They also took particular pleasure in describing themselves as aliens, with a variety of tentacles, bug eyes, and exotic colors, which Ms. Stewart spent some effort illustrating.

It might seem that teaching students some French is not much help for their learning basic literacy skills in English, but you might reflect on the number of literacy skills that were being learned in Ms. Stewart's French lessons. (As you may have assumed, she set up their situation and their search for an inhabited planet in a more elaborate way than indicated in this much-abbreviated description.)

Teachers, Try It Out*

1. You are introducing the suffixes that indicate past tense. How can you fit this task into a story form?

2. You want to draw students' attention to detailed word forms, so you decide to design a class on recognizing words within words (e.g., "at" in "cat" or "ate" in "plate"). How can you fit this task into a story form?

3. You want to draw students' attention to differences between written and oral forms of language. How can you fit this task into a story form?

Final Words

This chapter has focused on one general sense of the story in teaching literacy. There are many common accessories that could be used in lessons like those described—dress-up props, puppets, pictures, story chair or rug, and so on. Again, they've not been mentioned here because there are many excellent books that describe this aspect of literacy teaching. Instead, this chapter has looked at bringing out the emotional and imaginative importance that is at the core of literacy as a human activity.

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*In the Appendix there are suggested responses to these challenges as well as responses for every chapter in which there is a "Teachers, Try It Out" section.

When beginning to plan any literacy task, it would do no harm to ask, like the newspaper editor, "What's the story here?" That is, how can the topic be presented in a manner that brings out its emotional meaning and engages the students' imaginations? It isn't possible to be mesmerizingly successful at this all day, every day, of course, but it's a question that can help you to be a bit more imaginative and to find what is emotionally important about the topic personally as well as for the students.

Twenty years ago—good heavens!—I wrote a book called *Teaching as Story Telling.* The theme of that book, as of this chapter, was to show that thinking about lessons and units of study as good stories to tell, rather than simply as sets of objectives to attain, can help to bring some extra energy and interest into teaching and learning.