

## **Narratizing and Personalizing**

### **What are narratizing and personalizing cognitive tools?**

Narratizing refers to casual and quick use of a related tool—the story form. When one narratizes one finds something within the content that lends itself to brief vivifying by means of an anecdote or a personal detail. And that brings us to the other item discussed in this set. Personalizing is simply the way in which we can convert events or content that is normally removed from any personal traits into something immediately more engaging by putting it into a human context or imbuing it with human characteristics.

Use of this tool colours our representation of events with appropriately recognized emotion, organizing events by identifying acceptable causal sequences, integrating motives into the causal sequences, interpreting intentions in diverse personalities, and so on. These are, needless to say, enormously sophisticated cognitive capacities, but ones all children will have in greater or lesser degree. In teaching students who will have the tools of orality in place, then, we will want to reflect on how we might build on those capacities and develop them further in turn.

In the imaginative classroom we will expect to see much readier use of narratizing and personalizing of content than is common at present, at least in the classrooms we have seen. All teachers know that if they pause and tell the students about some weird event or accident that they saw on the way to school, attention is immediately enhanced; if the event is well told, one can feel the intensity of interests among the students. The trick is to think about whatever topic one is teaching, and introduce items of interest to students that will enhance understanding and engage students' imaginations. The lives of mathematicians, scientists, explorers, and writers are chock-full of incidents that are not the usual focus of teaching, but which can enlighten and enliven a great deal of the world students are learning about.

### **How can we employ narratizing and personalizing in teaching?**

**Topic:** Human impact on environment

**Subject Area:** Science

**Cognitive Tool:** Narratizing and Personalizing

Narratizing a topic means discussing it in a more casual way—what some might consider more like “gossip”. In this case we are concerned with this tool that shapes a topic into a casual story form. For this topic the teacher might mention to students about what he or she noticed on the way to school that morning. Perhaps a formerly vacant lot now had the beginnings of a building being framed. Perhaps a local park is being bulldozed to make room for a shopping mall. Did the students notice that the wooded area next to the school grounds was being considered as a site, possibly, for a new school building? Wouldn't that be great? But would students miss not having the woods to explore after school? What might the loss of that land,

or the park being bulldozed to build a mall mean for local bird populations? Where would they go?

**Topic:** Vocabulary Development—Colors

**Subject Area:** Second Language Learning

**Cognitive Tool:** Narratizing and Personalizing

Consider teaching colors. Each color could become a character. Meet M. Rouge. What is the face of M. Rouge? He is often flustered and angry. He is also often in love. He loves to eat apples, cherries and tomatoes. How we describe M. Rouge will draw out associations with red things. Of course, at early stages of language acquisition, our description of M. Rouge may contain a fair amount of English. As students progress, however, more and more French may be used. One could have students imagine M. Rouge, a firefighter by trade, standing next to a gleaming red fire truck. As they learn about M. Rouge students could, in this way, also learn words for angry (en colère), being in love (être amoureux/uese), an apple (une pomme), cherries (des cerises), tomatoes (des tomates) etc. M. Rouge can become a character in a story of color that would, of course, include Mlle. Jaune (she has a really sunny disposition, loves lemonade and daffodils), Mme. Orange (a big fan of Halloween, autumn and orange juice) and M. Vert (a park ranger and an activist in the fight against global warming, loves frogs and lying in the grass). Each character in the story of color will have features, likes and dislikes that best express their color. Students may take on their characters more fully and create short skits in which they role-play their color. How does M. Bleu behave? What happens when M. Bleu meet Mlle. Jaune? Students may do visual representations of each color in which they would include an extended list of all items they associate with that color. They could become experts on that color by “collecting” all the words of items that are their color.

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Teaching of opposites may also be made more engaging and effective through employing story, personalizing, and image. One might tell students of a place called “Petit.” What would one find there? Well, certainly not NBA basketball players. One would find children (des enfants), toys (des jouets), flowers (des fleurs), bugs (des insectes), pebbles (des galets), and maybe a few Smart Cars. In “Petit”, the place, what happens? One would try to develop for students a mental image of “Petit”. Next one might have students imagine what it might be like to shrink in size and what might happen if they were to travel to “Petit”. In contrast, we could story also the place known as “Grand.” Ah, here are all the NBA basketball players. No babies in “Grand” just an over-population of elephants (des éléphants), giraffes (des girafes), dinosaurs (des dinosaures) and Hummers. Where would students prefer to live? What happens in “Petit” that doesn’t happen in “Grand” and vice versa? One might split the class and have students repeat the process described above for two new places – Jeune and Vieux (young and old) or Large and Étroit (wide and narrow). Again, depending on the level of student language acquisition, varying degrees of French would be expected and would be used. The objective would be to build

student vocabulary and, using the learning tools mentioned above, to ensure that they were also building rich meanings attached to the vocabulary items.

**Topic:** Spelling—Discriminating homophones

**Subject Area:** Language Arts

**Cognitive Tool:** Narratizing and Personalizing

Can narratizing and personalizing help us teach students to distinguish homophones, like “to,” “two,” and “too”? In this case we can invent three friends, whose names are To, Two, and Too. We can invent a game in which each of the friends’ personalities is somehow captured by their name. The students can be engaged in thinking about how the different forms of the words might capture their personalities.

Too is clearly very big, because he eats “too” much, he is also “too” tall, is clearly hyperactive, and always going beyond what is sensible. Unlike everyone else in his group, even when he includes the letter “o” in his name, he has to include two “o”s. (Deriving a personality from a name may seem a little bizarre, but it is a task which relies on an energetic use of metaphor (see **Metaphor**), and children can usually do this more easily than adults.)

Two obviously does everything in pairs when she can—she has two cell-phones, two bikes, and is obviously over careful, in case she loses one thing, she always has a backup. It is clear from the spelling of her name that she really wishes she were a twin, as she’s managed to put a “w” in her name, which is half way to “twin,” even though there is nothing in her name that the “w” sounds like.

To is constantly on her way elsewhere, or pointing to different things and places. She’s clearly never satisfied with where she is or what she’s got: a bit of a complainer. She’s in so much of a hurry that, unlike the other two, she’s dropped the third letter from her name, and is the slimmest from all her hurrying.

Students can be encouraged to imagine characters based on the meaning of the word, in such a way that they will likely remember them easily thereafter.

Once the class has developed three distinct characters who capture something about the differences between “To,” “Two,” and “Too,” the teacher can begin to explore these differences in composing, perhaps with the students, a story in which all three figure. The trick would be to try to build into the story the deeper understanding of language and literacy that can come from grasping how the same sound can perform three different linguistic roles, depending on context, and how literacy enables the eye to see immediately which of the three is intended. Part of the plot could involve the three characters’ irritation at constantly being confused, even though they think the differences among them are obvious if people only knew them.

## Why does narratizing and personalizing engage our imaginations?

Narratizing or shaping our descriptions of the world and our experiences in emotionally engaging ways may also be described as “gossip.” The problem with this, of course, is that “gossip” has come, disparagingly, to mean “idle” chatter, talk of no social importance or seriousness. “Gossip,” as a result of old and discredited prejudices, was associated generally with the casual talk of women, talk usually focused on matters of the home and family and local events rather than the “important” areas of “male” business and politics, generally distinguishing between talk belonging to the private rather than public world. The word, in English, comes from “godsibb,” a person related to one in God, as in “godparent,” and “gossip” is the kind of talk we might have with such a person. However, anthropologists increasingly recognize in gossip one of the most important sources of human social stability, and see it also as perhaps the arena for the first development of language (Mithen, 1996, Ch. 10). It is not insignificant that this form of talk about everyday social activity is usually the easiest for us, and the form that we (whether male or female) engage in most readily (Dunbar, 1991). Gossip narratives are, of course, a kind of story, so this cognitive tool has features in common with the discussion of the story form above. But gossip is also different in its informality, its casualness, its common lack of formal structuring. Also, while we think of gossip as idle or time-wasting, it does, of course, continue to play a vital social role. It represents perhaps the oldest of the cognitive tools of orality.

One prominent form of this narratizing process is evident in the way events or things are put into personal forms and humanized in terms of human emotions and purposes—because these are what we seem able to understand most easily. When we personalize content students are often readily engaged.

It seems too little recognized that good literacy skills rely very heavily on the development of good orality skills. While young children live in an oral culture, it is too often the case that their oral cultural “cognitive tools” are not adequately developed. What many students who are having difficulty with literacy need is a richer and enlarged orality to build literacy on. Commonly in schools, students who have difficulties reading and writing are sat by themselves in front of a computer or with worksheets, cutting them off from the oral development that they most precisely need. And at home they may spend hours in front of TV or playing with electronic gadgets, all of which do nothing for the cognitive tools development that is most needed. Narratizing and personalizing in early childhood is one of the easiest ways to develop the foundations for rich orality on which we can then build a rich literacy.