

Story/Story Form

What are stories?

The story form is one of the most powerful tools students have available for imaginatively engaging with knowledge. Stories are instruments for orienting our emotions to their contents. That is, stories do not just convey information about events and characters, nor do stories just convey information in a way that engages our emotions; stories orient, or shape, our emotions to the events and characters in a particular way; they tell us how to feel about their contents. No other form of language can do this, and so no other form of language can achieve the range and kinds of effects that stories can. The story is like a musical score and our emotions are the instrument it is designed to play.

The value of the story to teaching is precisely its power to engage the students' emotions and also, connectedly, their imaginations in the material of the curriculum. There are two senses of the story. The commonest is that fictional form, made up of invented characters, which teller and hearer understand is not literally true. The second sense is perhaps easily understood in terms of the newspaper editor who asks a reporter, "What's the story on this?" The reporter's task is to select and organize the material in order to bring out the emotional and imaginative meaning of the topic, to shape the events to bring out their emotional force. This is the sense in which teachers can use stories routinely in teaching any content, without fictionalizing it in any way.

How can we employ the story form in teaching?

Topic: Whales

Subject Area: Science

Cognitive Tool: Story

Our story on whales is about the majestic size and behavior of this strange mammal—the only one to have adapted to life in the deep oceans—and its vulnerability to human activity. We might begin with the image of a blue whale's heart being the size of a small car and talk briefly about the massive forces at work in such a vast organ. An average blue whale's tongue is roughly the size of an elephant – having children 'construct' such an awareness out of gym supplies will give them a sense of the stunning scale involved with whales. To understand the sheer magnitude of these creatures, students could begin a collection of amazing facts organized around "Snails versus Whales". Physical features could be contrasted in this regard, reinforcing the binary structuring of ideas along shape, dimension, mass, etc. (The students will likely discover that a blue whale's tongue alone weighs up to 4 tons, that it can weigh up to an astonishing 200 tons, and eat up to 8 tons of plankton and/or 4 tons of krill each day.)

Topic: The environment

Subject Area: Science

Cognitive Tool: Story

In this unit, students will take the role of a young royal who before ascending to the throne must prove his appreciation and understanding of the kingdom he will inherit. The royal, who has spent his entire life confined to secure and comfortable palace quarters, will now be set free to carefully observe and make note of various features within the palace gates and outside them (in the unfamiliar, mysterious Hinterlands). Over the next several weeks, as the young royal embarks on this journey, he will carefully document his impressions of the sights and sounds encountered. Upon returning to the kingdom, the would-be ruler will use these sights and sounds in detailing all that he has learned of his kingdom.

Topic: Locomotor and Non-Locomotor Movements

Subject Area: Physical Education

Cognitive Tool: Story

What's the story on movement? As much as children (and adults) often like to move around just for the fun of it, movement is also directly linked to an animal's survival. Given our high position on the food chain we, unlike those animals below us, do not have to worry too much in our daily lives about predators out to eat us for lunch. This is not the case for the animals that surround us. The way they behave and, specifically, how they move is directly related to their survival. One story on movement can focus on the astonishing diversity of animal movements, and the strategies they employ to survive. Framed in terms of movements of predator and prey in the animal kingdom, this story aims to evoke a sense of wonder and awe at the diversity of animal movement.

Why do stories engage our imaginations?

In an oral culture one knows mostly only what one remembers, and as the story is one of the most effective tools for encoding important social information in a memorable form, it is used universally. In addition, it can shape the emotions of the hearer to respond to its contents as can nothing else. Like all these cognitive tools, this one doesn't go away as we grow older. So literate folk like us continually tend to shape our histories from a pure account of what happened towards some story that carries a moral about the virtues of our country or people, highlighting "our" beliefs and values over those of other countries' and other people's. We use stories constantly in our daily lives to give emotional meaning to what would otherwise remain, as it has been eloquently put, "just one damn thing after another." Stories shape events into emotionally meaningful patterns. The great educational power of stories is that they perform two tasks at the same time. They are, first, very effective at communicating information in a memorable form and, second, they can orient the hearer's feelings about the information being communicated. Stories can shape real-world content as well as fictional material.

In the imaginative classroom, teachers will always have in the back of their minds an impulse to look for ways to tell the story about the content of a lesson or unit. What's the story about this? If it is the problem of how to teach students to distinguish the spellings of such homophones as

“there,” “their,” and “they’re,” the teacher who knows how stories can readily engage student’s imaginations will avoid the usual drill and repetition exercises, at least at first. Instead students might be told that there is a new family in the neighborhood and they have three children who are called, a bit surprisingly, There, Their, and They’re. We have to remember the way each spells his or her name. The students can be divided into three groups and each group given one of the names. Their task is to decide on what the character of the person is from the spelling of the name. The teacher could start this off by suggesting that “There” is a very kind and helpful person, whose last three letters seem just to be pointing away to things so people know where they are—she is constantly pointing with the tail of the final “e” that things are there, over there, there. Her character is of a helpful, cheerful, precise person. “Their” on the other hand is a very egotistical fellow. He is self-regarding—you can tell this because he keeps his ego, his “i” inside, and traps it with the final consonant. He is also, unfortunately, rather greedy and envious, and constantly goes on about what people own. “They’re” is the oldest, as he has grown more letters than the other two. He is a very inquisitive member of the family, constantly asking “why?” In fact he asks it so often at school that he seemed to have his hand permanently up as soon as he thought of another “y” question to ask, hence the apostrophe. He is a bit boring, as he keeps telling people about what the family is doing or planning all the time: “they’re going to get a new car,” or “they’re going to watch TV tonight,” or “they’re planning to go to Mexico.” When invited to invent characteristics based on the spelling, and then to invent a short story about them, students will fix the distinctions in their minds.