

Once upon a time: Reclaiming storytelling in schools

April 3 2013, by Julie Faulkner



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

With high stakes testing and a crowded curriculum, something fundamental is being left behind in education – storytelling.

Some might argue that speaking and listening have always been undervalued in schools, but the surge of technology has done nothing to

stem the tide.

Digital storytelling is increasingly a popular way to represent narratives. But traditional methods of reading aloud and immersing young listeners in story should not be forgotten.

Tall tales

Narratives have long been recognised as central to our human experience. Teacher and author of [The Cool Web](#), Margaret Meek, described them as "a primary act of the mind".

Stories are ways to create a sense of events and exchanges, as we organise our experiences into meaningful episodes. To do this, we call upon combinations of [prior knowledge](#), assumption, expectation, inference, pattern matching and metaphor. As we create different scenarios, we build understanding of narrative structure and develop deeper kinds of cultural and historical understanding.

Moreover, traditional storytelling engages young learners in ambiguous and beguiling ways. It draws upon familiar and strange forms: fables, legends, folk tales, riddles, fairy stories, myth and conundrums. Such forms connect to deep memory.

Told well, stories immerse young listeners in rich social, cultural, historical and anthropological content, encouraging wonder.

Connection through stories

Traditional [storytelling](#) ranges across cultures and sees different [narratives](#) represent human experience. Through rich stories, students are offered deeper access to understanding themselves and their world.

Storytelling reveals connections between people across social, cultural, temporal and geographic divides.

Who of us can remember The School Papers? Indigenous Dream Time stories were favoured and well-remembered among my peers, linking our very white school population of the time to strange but familiar traditions.

More recently a friend's children were asked by their school to bring in three objects that were of special value to their family. Each child's objects were labelled and displayed. Then parents and grandparents were invited in to tell the story of these objects while the children sat, listened and asked questions. Not only were the students engaged with storytelling but they were connected to lived experience and personal histories.

In addition to deeper cultural understanding, storytelling can use its empathic power to raise significant moral dilemmas, challenging listener perspectives and inviting ethical debate. It can engage children approachably with more complex issues around ethnicity, class and gender.

Carefully guided discussions on the part of the teacher would tease out the ethical tensions and promote extended social awareness and respect.

Speech and story

Telling stories importantly also develops speaker confidence. Assured speakers – many Americans for example – are often admired, but is this culturally inherent or something that can be learned? I suggest the latter.

Storytelling imparts rhythm and pacing, communicating ways that gesture and imagery work when we interact. To fully engage, we have to

learn to hear the sound of our own voices as well as those of others.

These are essential social skills – ones that are so often talked about as being vital to effective human interaction. Above all, storytelling can be magical and fun. As a creative form, stories value the power of the imagination to enhance life. They can be ritualised forms of enjoyment or spontaneous and playful, carefully crafted or improvised and messy.

And yet this kind of learning through story is increasingly marginalised in the crowded and assessment-driven curriculum.

In whatever shape or form, they should be part of our children's growing experience of the world, of other lives, places and times. Increased appreciation of what spoken language can do offers greater understanding of the human condition.

In times of rising government control and teacher accountability, educators and parents need to rediscover the pleasure of storytelling.

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