

Why Bother: *The Use of Storytelling in the Classroom*

By Judith Black

In everyday life, we've got TVs, DVDs, and MP3s. We've got 3D movies and streaming Netflix. Why bother with something as low tech as telling a story? What could possibly be learned more efficiently from this form of education than the more technologically sophisticated approaches?

There is a story about an anthropologist who goes to a small village in Western Africa. As anthropologists are wont to do, this one pokes all about sticking his nose into every pot and peering around every dark corner. During one sojourn, he discovers television sets. They are stacked four deep in a hut at the village edge. Now, this village had been given the wonderful western gift of electricity just a few years earlier, and no doubt some wonderful product promotions representative had presented them with the essential TVs. The anthropologist was confused by their lack of use, so he went to speak with the village elder.

Anthropologist: Why don't you use your television sets?

Elder: We have a storyteller.

Anthropologist: That's quite quaint, but the television knows thousands of stories.

Elder: True, but the storyteller knows us.

And so unlike any preprogrammed device, we have that variable that separates us from other animals. We have flexible intelligence and are able to see the needs of students and meet them through this medium, which excites the imagination and welcomes the heart in a way that no other teaching device can. I call this unique gift *Contact Interaction Personalization*, or CIP.

Contact happens when you take your students on a journey through story; you are given a window into their hearts and minds. Un-intimidated by the possibility of 'failing' or appearing unable to comprehend new ideas

or facts, the students' gates of perception are wide open and unthreatened.



ou have the opportunity to see them as you have never seen them before: responding to new information, emotionally charged imagery, and sequenced events, without the intimidation that has often been engendered in traditional educational settings.

create an environment in which they can safely journey into their imaginations and known realms. Interaction is what happens naturally when you are telling. With nothing but shared images between you, you find yourself responding immediately to your listeners. Making an evil, a boring part

faster, or a repetition participatory are all part of responding to your listeners' needs and interests.

This leads to **Personalization**, the reshaping of the story to create a unique experience between you and each group of listeners. The story is the quilt; the shape it takes has to do with who becomes wrapped up inside it. This special connection does not occur with any other presentational art form.

CIP AS A TEACHING TOOL

Preschool Aged Students: Stories can address pre-concrete operational learning skills, helping young children to master recall, sequencing, and grouping, which are necessities before they can move on to concrete operational thinking. Most stories from a folkloric source appropriate for these ages include repetition. Whether it's the return of a familiar refrain, or a sequence of events that reproduces itself, such constructions call out for participation. By knowing your goals in telling the story, you can make it work for you. When working with young people whose learning base is sensory-motor, the opportunity for full motor involvement should rarely be passed up. It allows children a growing ownership of the story; it keeps busy bodies busy, and can reinforce those previously mentioned learning skills.

Elementary, Middle and High School Students: Stories can teach, reinforcing curriculum in the most logical and creative ways imaginable. Jane Yolen reminds us that world folklore is a 'window into other cultures.' Our national folklore, from the Native American Gluskabe, to the African American Briar Rabbit, to the westward movement's Pecos Bill, inform us of aspects of American heritage that will never be learned from a history text. American history itself, told from the multiple vantage points of the people who lived it, serves to expand a student's understanding of how any fact or event never stands in isolation, but is shaped by the times and the people living through it. If you would like to explore this concept further, please go to the History Stories. Finally, almost any subject matter can be presented in story form. One need only find a character with personality and motivation to draw learners through a process they might otherwise be bored or intimidated by. From Fractilios Fraction, that wild and crazy kid who just can't keep her hands to herself, constantly fractioning the other shapes in the schoolyard, to Cynthia the Caterpillar, who is so sure she's destined for butterfly-dom that she alienates the earthier Chuck Caterpillar completely, these stories engage the heart and imagination and take students into academic realms with ease.

CIP AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL GROWTH

Stories draw the listener into another's world, welcomed and unthreatened. This offers the listener space to identify with the issues and/or characters, often allowing their catharsis to reverberate through and deeply touch the listener.

Bettleheim speaks profoundly to this point in his *Uses of Enchantment*, and anyone who has worked with young people will have experienced how deeply attached they become to certain stories. Whereas Bettleheim uses the traditional model of fairy tales, I have discovered that we can create original tales, shaped upon the specific needs of our children and students to help draw them through issues.

The enclosed articles, *Stories from Real Life and Family Stories*, published by the NSA Magazine will show you how to do this. Other articles and curriculum guides can be made available for the asking.