

The Storyteller Arrives

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is not about
drama...**
it's about
new ways
to inspire
students

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6

The Storyteller Arrives

Retelling a story can enrich and extend students' personal hoard of words, ideas, stories, songs, and concepts, and deepen their understanding and appreciation of literature. Retelling increases students' mastery of language by showing them that words can be manipulated into new meanings. It helps students actively internalize language structures and styles. It develops the ability to turn narration into dialogue and dialogue into narration. It encourages role-playing, which, in turn, provides students with valuable practice in shifting points of view and in experimenting with different styles of language and a variety of voices. Retelling can provide the initial starting point for the drama. It can reveal an unexplained idea in even a well-known story. It can focus details. It can be review of what has already taken place, or it can serve as a way of building reflection in role.

Engaging Students in Retelling

There are many ways to help students learn to retell stories.

- Students can retell stories in a circle, or with a partner. You can provide opportunities for them to change the story, or find the new stories within the story.
- Using wordless picture books, students can describe in their own words what they see happening, sometimes supplying the characters with what they feel is appropriate dialogue.
- As a student retells a tale, signal for someone to continue the story or allow another child to take over at a dramatic pause in the story.
- When you recount a story, pause every so often, and point to someone in the group to add an appropriate word. "Once upon a time there was a young . . ." "He walked until suddenly . . ." "He said . . ."
- Holding a "talking stick" can give a student the right to speak. The "talking stick" is passed on to the next student when the speaker stops (which can even be in mid-phrase).
- One student retells to a partner a story in role which the teacher told; then, the second student tells the story back in another role to the first student.
- One student begins telling a story. The object is to get to the end of the story without being distracted by the partner. As a variant, the students work in groups of three. Two students tell stories simultaneously and compete for the attention of the third.
- Each student in a small group reads the same story silently. When students have finished, number them off. On a pre-arranged signal, student 1 from each group begins to retell until the signal sounds. Student 2 takes over, then student 3, and so on — in this way the story is retold with no one student responsible. Students can retell from various points of view or try multipart

narration, where one narrator shapes the tale while others retell from their chosen points of view. Finally, students can get inside the story by exploring a challenging or magical part, creating a chant or rhyme to “help” the characters out of difficulty.

It is best to truly tell a traditional story like this rather than read it off a page.

A story to tell: “The Shoemaker and the Elves”

There was a shoemaker once who made very fine shoes, but up until now he had been plain unlucky. It didn’t seem to matter how hard he worked. He just got poorer and poorer. Soon he couldn’t buy enough leather and materials to make shoes.

One Sunday night, he laid out his tools and his last piece of leather on the workbench.

“Perhaps if I get up early I can make one pair of shoes and try to sell them.” Then heaving a big sigh, he went sadly to bed.

When he entered his shop Monday morning, the leather was nowhere to be seen, but on the workbench was a pair of shoes in the latest fashion. The astonished shoemaker took them outside into the light and held them up. They were completely finished down to the last seam and there wasn’t a poor stitch in them. The shoemaker ran back into the shop to fetch his wife.

“What’s happened?” she said.

“Come quickly.” They ran into the shop. The shoemaker held up the shoes. “Will you look at this! Someone has done us a great kindness.”

“Well, don’t stand there gawking, man. Put them in the window. Let’s see if we can sell them,” said his wife.

It just happened that a passer-by looked in the window as the shoemaker was placing the shoes. She entered the shop, inspected the shoes, and was so pleased with the quality and style of the work she bought them.

“Work this fine deserves more than you’re asking,” she said. And the woman paid the shoemaker handsomely.

Now the shoemaker had enough money to buy leather for two pairs of shoes. On Monday night he laid out his tools and the leather and went peacefully to bed.

When he entered the shop on Tuesday morning, there were two pairs of shoes on the workbench, beautifully made and ready for sale. The shoemaker’s hammer, awl, knife, wax, thread, needles, and pegs were scattered about the workbench as though someone was working there, but there was no one to be seen.

“I don’t know what is happening,” exclaimed the shoemaker, “but it’s a miracle!” That morning he sold both pairs of shoes and the satisfied customers gladly gave him more money than he was asking. Now he had enough money to buy leather for four pairs of shoes. And so it continued, night after night. The delighted shoemaker would set out his leather, and each morning newly made shoes appeared in the shop.

Day after day customers came and paid such high prices that the shoemaker was able to buy a good quantity of leather. More and more shoes got made. More and more shoes got sold. More and more money filled the shoemaker’s pockets.

One night as the shoemaker set out enough leather for twenty-four pairs of shoes, his wife said, “I am so curious to know what happens in here

while we're asleep. Why don't we hide in the shop tonight and try to find out who it is who is doing us this kindness?"

And so they did. The shoemaker and his wife pushed a clothes rack full of clothes into the shop and hid behind it.

Bong! Bong! Bong! The clock began to strike the midnight hour. Everything was still. Suddenly two tiny elves bounced into the room. They were naked. They didn't have a stitch of clothing on. They leaped onto the workbench and without so much as a word set to work. Their fingers fairly flew as they bored holes, pulled thread and hammered away with a rap tap, tap tap, tack, tack, tack.

The shoemaker and his wife couldn't believe their eyes. The elves worked swiftly and skillfully and soon twenty-four pairs of shoes were finished down to the last stitch. Then in the blink of an eye, the elves sprang up and dashed away.

The shoemaker's wife was speechless. When she finally found her words, she said, "I feel terrible. Those poor wee things have made us rich, but did you notice, they can't even afford clothes. We must help them. We must show our thanks and kindness."

"What do you have in mind?" asked the shoemaker. "I don't think they'll take our money."

"I have it," said his wife, "I've got scraps of cloth, enough ends of yarn to make them little sweaters and trousers, maybe even hats. You must make them some shoes."

And that's what they did.

When everything was ready, the shoemaker and his wife laid out sweaters, hats, trousers, and shoes. Then they hid behind the clothes rack.

At midnight the elves skipped in to begin work. They looked around. They saw no leather. Instead, they saw two sweaters, two pair of trousers, two woolen hats with tassels, and four leather shoes with pointy toes.

The elves looked at each other. Their faces wore puzzled looks. Then it dawned on them. The clothes were for them. They snatched up the clothes and dressed themselves. Then they started dancing around laughing and singing at the top of their voices.

"Now we are handsome gentlemen. Why should we ever work again?"

Then dressed from tasseled hats to pointy shoes, they began to skip and run about like wild things. They leaped over chairs, dove in and out of drawers, then stood on the spot and started spinning like tops. Suddenly they stopped twirling, gave a great screech, and flew out the door.

They never came back, but the shoemaker and his wife had no regrets, and they were always lucky after that.

Picturing the story

A teacher told the story "The Shoemaker and the Elves" to her Grade 3 class. She planned to do some story retelling with them, but before doing that, she invited the students to revisit the story in their imaginations and to share with the class anything they had noticed as they listened.

At first, some students were silent. They didn't quite know how to answer, but after a few gentle prompts, observations were made. Most agreed that they had made pictures in their minds and offered examples. ("I saw the bit where the elves were running around like crazy at the end.")

Visual Retelling

Picture retelling can be used with a variety of texts, including nursery rhymes, biographies, poems, and chapter books. Students can compare their retellings with those completed by their classmates. Did they choose to illustrate the same events? If not, how did this affect the retelling?

Side-Coach Note: Quick Sketch

When you do this with a class, encourage the students to make quick sketches, even just stick figures. Tell them that once the story is sketched, they can color in the pictures, if there's time. Allow a minimum of 25 minutes for the activity, but be prepared to go longer. As the students work, circulate among them. You may need to review bits of the story with some students having difficulty.

Side-Coach Note: Circle Draw

With younger students who don't work effectively with partners yet, seat the class in a circle with the paper and crayons on the inside. Having the students in close proximity will encourage some talk about the story as they work.

Side-Coach Note: Say It Again

Even the best storyteller in the world can suddenly dry up and forget what comes next. Let the students know that this might happen to them and that there is a way to deal with it. Tell the students that if their minds suddenly go blank and they can't remember what comes next, they should simply repeat what their partners just told them. Doing so will avoid having the story falter.

The teacher pressed the students to recall mental pictures in greater detail. "Did anyone make a picture of the shoes made by the elves? Did anyone notice the colors of the sweaters made by the shoemaker's wife?" More and more personal experiences of the story emerged. Questions were posed. "If the elves were magic, why wouldn't they know the shoemaker and his wife were spying on them?" "Did elves really exist?" Memories were shared. "I saw this story done by the Muppets only they changed a lot of stuff." This comment led the students into discussion of picture book versions they had experienced and other stories about shoes, boots, and the supernatural.

When the students had finished telling the stories of their listening, the teacher had them find partners. She handed out large sheets of newsprint to each pair and asked them to draw the story. These students had done a lot of story mapping in class, and many set to work retelling the story that way. A few students divided the paper into equal segments and created a storyboard. One pair drew a large pair of very fancy shoes in the middle of the paper then sketched key story moments around the shoes as they pieced the tale together.

The work described here is important to the eventual success of the story retelling — this is a very effective rehearsal strategy.

When the drawing phase had concluded, the teacher asked the students to face each other with the drawing between them. The students were labeled A and B and informed that A would begin to tell the story to B in his or her own words, pretending that B had never heard it before. The teacher explained that after 30 seconds, she would ring a bell to signal that it was student B's turn to take over and continue the telling, and so on. She also stressed that in the activity, good listening was as important as telling and that the teller should not be interrupted or ignored.

Some students finished way ahead of others and the teacher had them begin again, making sure to take time to make everything happen.

Making images — Whoosh!

At the conclusion of the story retelling, the teacher observed that much of the picturing the students had described from their listening wasn't happening in the retelling. She chose to introduce a game called Whoosh!, which encourages participants to concentrate on making images. She sat the students in a circle and explained that she would tell the story "The Shoemaker and the Elves" again and that they could all participate in the telling. As the story proceeded, any who wished could enter the circle, taking on the shape and acting out what was being described.

"All you must do is listen to the story, and be and do what the story says," she said. "When I say 'Whoosh!' anyone in the centre of the circle must leave immediately and sit back in your place. You can participate as much as you like."

The teacher began by reminding the students of the cast of characters. "Once upon a time, there was a shoemaker and his wife, some very clever elves, and many, many satisfied shoe purchasers." Students entered the playing space and mimed being elves, customers, or shoemakers. When the teacher said, "Whoosh!" they quickly left the space to await the next bit of the story.

Discovering stories within the story

In the days to follow, the teacher engaged the students in drama activities that brought to light stories to be found inside "The Shoemaker and the Elves."

- The students made still images (see the Glossary, “Overview of Drama Conventions”) in groups that represented the bad luck the shoemaker and his wife had experienced.
- The students conducted interviews in pairs with the customer who bought the first pair of shoes. They worked on the notion that these couldn’t have been ordinary shoes. What was it about them that had so intrigued the buyer and moved her to pay more?
- The students hot-seated, or interviewed, the teacher-in-role as the shoemaker’s wife to find out what materials she had on hand when she decided to clothe the elves and to describe the final outfits. Some questions of interest to the students were as follows:
 1. Because of the elves your bad luck changed. What did you learn from the elves that made things better?
 2. Were the elves thankful for the clothes, or were they making fun of you?
 3. If you could do it again, would you still make the clothes, or would you try something different?
 4. Did you try anything to get the elves to come back?

The teacher-in-role couldn’t answer the second question, so formed the students into a corridor of voices (see the Glossary, “Overview of Drama Conventions”) and then walked through as the students suggested other possibilities. (Examples: “The elves were cross because you made the clothes out of old scraps.” “You need sparkly stuff to dress elves.”)

- Customers were willing to pay more than the price indicated on the price tag to own the shoes. But these were fairy shoes. Students discussed what might be scary, annoying, or fun about wearing these shoes. In small groups they did one-minute improvisations in which they portrayed the challenges posed by wearing such shoes.
- Students worked in groups of four. One student took the part of the third-person narrator and the others each took a first-person role (e.g., the shoemaker, an elf, a customer). A multipart retelling was attempted. The third-person narrator started off and then quickly called upon the others, one at a time, to tell the story from their viewpoint. The telling went back and forth between the narrator and the first-person tellings until the story was finished.

Side-Coach Note: Third-Person Narration

With younger students, you can model the activity by taking the part of the third-person narrator. Seat the students in a circle and assign parts: the shoemaker, the shoemaker’s wife, a customer, another customer, elf one, elf two, and so on. Depending on class size, you may have triple casting or more.

Begin the story, then point to a student who then advances the story through the eyes of his or her character. When you take the story back, link the previous teller’s work to that of the next teller with brief narration and point to another student.