

BUILDING A STORYTELLING CLUB

There is no greater joy than seeing a child's face shine in the light of your words as you tell a story. There is no greater satisfaction than watching your passion for storytelling grow in the lives of children as they experience magic for themselves and share it with others. In the words of Jane Yolen, "Touch magic.... pass it on!"

Having discovered the power and magic of storytelling myself, I wanted to share this experience with my middle school students. So in the spring of 1987, I put a notice of an after school storytelling club on the morning announcements. Fifteen students signed up, thus began the "Chatterton Talespinners." The weekly meetings continued for seventeen years and resulted in the writing and publication of a book, *Raising Voices: Creating Youth Storytelling Groups and Troupes*. Coauthored with Kevin Cordi, the book has received numerous awards and inspired others to share their love of storytelling with young people. This article is a summary of the most important topics covered in our book.

When I initiated Talespinners my goals were small. I wanted my students to feel the same excitement and sense of accomplishment that I did telling stories. My mother was in a nursing home at the time, and I wanted bring my students there to entertain the residents. Besides running the middle school library, I was also working a day and a half in one of the three elementary schools in our school district. I wanted to bring the Talespinners to my elementary building. The group met Wednesdays after school for an hour, beginning in March and ended with a party in June. While I had hoped to attract a large group, I only had ten regular members. Together we grew and learned from one another.

To build your storytelling club or group, begin by planning for success. The more time you spend organizing and preparing, the less backtracking and changing you will need to do later on. You will feel confident and comfortable, which in turn, will give your students a sense of confidence and set the stage for fun.

Setting goals and objectives

Think about why you want to create a storytelling group and what you want the group to accomplish. One of your goals should include a performance. Storytelling is a performance art. Your members need to know their efforts will result in a visit to a preschool, Kindergarten class, family performance, book store, Senior Center or other venue. Not only will they know where they are going, they will know how long they have to prepare.

Meetings – when, where, how long, and how often

Where your group meets depends upon the age group you plan to work with and who you are. Usually middle and high school students are able to meet after school. Meeting during lunch or an activity period during the day works best for elementary age students. For teachers and librarians, you will want your own room for meetings. Volunteers, youth workers, public librarians, and free-lance storytellers have to work around the school schedule or meet during non-school hours or weekends.

Hold meetings once a week for an hour to an hour and a half. If you are limited to 45 minutes, try meeting twice a week. Find a room with moveable tables and chairs or desks. This will allow you to rearrange the room for a variety of activities such as listening to stories and working with partners or small groups. Decide on the duration of your meetings. *Raising Voices* has a suggested six and ten week meeting format, each culminating in a storytelling performance. Continuing to meet beyond the first performance allows for strengthening skills and additional performances and field trips.

Attracting club members

Start small and build. In a K-5 school work with fourth graders. Train them to be good storytellers, then make them form the backbone of your group the following year. In middle and high school, multi-age groups work well. The club may have only a few members at first, but as the idea catches on, kids will bring their friends.

Recruiting members may be as simple as making an announcement over the PA system or running an ad in the student newspaper. If you are a teacher or librarian, speaking to student one-on-one or a classroom announcement works well. If the young people you wish to attract may not be familiar with storytelling, or your meetings are going to be held outside of school or at another location. If this is the case, you'll have to work harder. Make up flyers, posters, newsletters describing the group and announcing the first meeting, then put them up and distribute them wherever young people congregate. Plan a special storytelling event. Train a few youngsters ahead of time and make them the featured storytellers. Tell some stories yourself or hire a professional. Serve refreshments – pizza and soft drinks are always a hit. Be sure to leave time for an icebreaker activity. Discuss the purpose of the group, what you hope to accomplish, and answer questions, then pass out permission slips and flyers for the first meeting.

Supplies: We recommend the following – chalkboard or flipchart, name tags, access to a copy machine, timer or stopwatch, bell or whistle, golf pencils, book carts and access to books, attendance book, clipboard, boxes or a closet to store supplies and props.

Establishing rules

Rules help meetings run smoothly and encourage members to treat each other with respect. Most importantly, you need to create a safe environment where everyone feels accepted and where members feel free to try without fear of ridicule or disapproval if they fail or make a mistake. Young people also need to learn how a good audience responds when an individual is performing for them. They need to know how to act when they are performing for others. Guidelines or rules for attendance and participation are also helpful. State your rules in a positive manner. Rules need not be burdensome or oppressive. Determine rules with your club members to give them a sense of ownership, but know ahead of time what you will and will not allow. Then guide the rule making process.

Meetings structure

Having a meeting structure will assure that you accomplish most of what you planned to do. *Social time* helps build community. Allow the members to eat, chat, and catch up on news before the meeting begins or during the first five or ten minutes. Attendance should be taken at that time

either by signing in or answering to a role call. It may be difficult to end the sociability so use a **ritual opening** to begin each meeting. A song, poem, special light, call and response, bell or simple welcome will set the tone and bring everyone to order. *Raising Voices* has a “Storyteller’s Pledge” that many groups have found useful.

Young people need to hear stories if they are to become good storytellers. Always include a **story** in your meeting, especially in the beginning. Telling a story after the ritual opening assures that you will not run out of time or have to rush a tale at the end of the meeting. Tell stories yourself at first, bring in an experienced teller from outside, or invite returning or former members to share a favorite tale. Encourage the group to watch for facial expression, gestures, pacing, voice and language. When the story ends, have the group briefly discuss what made the story come alive. While you want them to enjoy the story, you also want them to become aware of storytelling technique and performance.

After the story there should be an **activity or lesson** in which everyone participates. Arranging the members in pairs and small groups assures that everyone will have a chance to be heard. Devote the first few meetings to activities that help members get to know one another and to feel comfortable getting up in front of the group. As meetings progress, select activities that will help members choose, learn stories and practice stories they will tell later to an audience. Your students will need a lot of practice and feedback, but they’ll tire quickly of listening to one student practice in front of the entire group. Plan activities that will keep them improving their stories without getting bored or losing interest.

After the activity, spend some time **reflecting** on what went well and what was learned. To reinforce the skills your young tellers are developing, it is important to have verbalize what they’ve experienced. This is also the time to remind your members about homework, announcements, and preparations for the next meeting. End the meeting with a **ritual closing**; blow out the candle, sing a song, recite a poem, or speak to the good and welfare of the group.

Choosing stories

The first few meetings of any storytelling group or club should be spent building community, becoming comfortable with one another, getting up in front of a group, and expressing themselves in story. Then your storytellers can begin selecting and learning stories. Always have performance goal in mind, preferably with a definite date.

When working with young children, it is helpful if everyone learns the same stories in the beginning. As each member retells the same story they learn story structure. The story is reinforced and the children gain confidence in their own retelling. This is a good time to work on gestures, eye contact, and expression. When performance time comes and one of the young tellers becomes unsure of his own story, he can always fall back on one of the familiar ones.

Allow older students several weeks to choose the story they want to tell. Provide photocopied stories of one or two pages in length. Remind them to choose a story they can live with for a long time. Some students will find a story immediately and stick with it. Others will seem to take forever to find that perfect story. Allow them to use stories they’ve heard you tell. For bilingual students or students with reading difficulty, provide audiotapes or stories on CD. Choosing

stories from picture books can be a problem for young tellers. Many picture books are too long and wordy. Others rely on the pictures to tell the words and require embellishment that beginners find difficult.

Learning to tell

A story should live and grow with the teller. As you teach storytelling skills, discourage memorization, which makes the presentation stilted. There is always the danger of forgetting. You want your young tellers to make the story their own so that when it is told the story seems natural and conversational. In *Raising Voices*, we suggest a six-step process to learning stories. This includes choosing a story to tell, reading it out loud, creating a storyboard or story map, visualizing the story, practicing in small groups, and performing for an audience. Each step is crucial to becoming a successful storyteller and should be accompanied by activities and games to reinforce the story learning process and improve technique.

Encourage your storytellers to help one another improve. One way to do that is to teach them how to give positive *feedback* and helpful suggestions for improvement. Our society is always quick to criticize, but that has little place in a storytelling club. Both the teller and the listener grow by looking for what worked well. Insists that two positive comments be give before a suggestion for improvement. The storyteller always has the right not to accept the suggestion.

Preparing for a performance

Make a checklist of everything you need to do to prepare for the performance or field trip. Do you need permission slips, arrange for transportation, invitations, or flyers? Have you checked the school calendar to make sure there are no conflicts? Have you made contact with the person in charge of the performance space or the place you are going to visit? Keep phone numbers and other pertinent information handy. Arrange for some to take pictures or video. Don't forget to contact the newspaper and invite the administration.

Provide an opportunity for your group to rehearse their stories with a microphone. Talk about appropriate attire for the performance. Having a group T-shirt, cap, vest or simply a white shirt and dark pants or skirt insures that your tellers will look professional. Dressing the part reinforces confidence. Discuss respectful behavior before, during, and after a performance. Choose the lineup of storytellers. If some of your storytellers have learned several stories, decide which ones they are going to tell. Never let someone tell who is not prepared. This makes for improvised stories that go on and on or go nowhere. Appoint an Emcee tell about the group and introduce the tellers.

After the performance, revel in the glory of a job well done. Spend time reliving the highlights of the day. Find something positive to say about each storyteller and encourage your members to praise each other and themselves. Discuss what can be improved upon for the next performance, but don't dwell on it. Use the momentum and excitement to spur your group to work harder, improve their skills, and learn new stories.

Storytelling isn't for everyone. Do not be discouraged if some of your students drop out. There may be extenuating circumstances. Students may not want to devote the time it takes to learn and perfect storytelling skills. Decide how much effort you will spend getting wayward students back

to the meetings. Allow a child to leave gracefully. Let him know that he is a terrific kid and that he is welcome back any time.

As your storytelling year draws to close throw a party. Spend some time evaluating the past weeks and months with your group and on your own. What went well, what can be improved, what changes will you make the following year. Most of all, pat yourself on the back. You did it! Your storytellers gained invaluable experience. They've developed poise, self-confidence, and a love of stories. They've learned to cooperate, appreciate, encourage and support one another. You can rest, for a while, secure in the fact that you have kindled the storytelling flame in the lives of your young people. All you have to do is snap your fingers to set the fire ablaze again.

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