

Encouraging Kids to be Storytellers

Kids like to be part of a group. If the kids have a particular interest, it is fun to share that interest with other like-minded students.

Most children also yearn to make a school team. It is a status symbol to make a team. It is personally gratifying to achieve a position of honor on your team. Kids know that this achievement is earned.

I have found that the most rewarding venue for storytelling in school is to form a team. And, just as a child must achieve a certain proficiency in shooting and passing to make the basketball team, there must be a criteria to make the storytelling team. Although we have had some students on our storytelling team who have also been varsity athletes, the majority of our students are good kids whose athletic skills are not varsity level, but who still wish very badly to be a member of a varsity team.

In our school, we have two groups. The Forensic Team is our elementary team. It is open to any student who wishes to learn public speaking. I teach the basics in Forensics: standing still while speaking, projecting the voice, using gestures. A student who has been a member of the Forensic Team for at least a year may try out for varsity. We call it The Seashore Storytellers.

Varsity comes with certain perks. Kids who make the Seashore Storytellers get a special sweatshirt. They get trips to see well-known storytellers perform and we go out for pizza after these shows. They sometimes get to leave school in the middle of the day to perform. They get their pictures in the local newspaper for performing. They have a special party at the end of the year.

Some people feel that storytelling should be open to any student without pressure. I have found, in coaching for about a dozen years, that this does not work. Without setting the bar, kids will not reach for it. Unless there is the status of "making the team" and "staying on the team," kids will sign up to perform in a show, but will then lose a copy of their story, fail to memorize it, or generally feel that not much is expected of them. On the other hand, when kids realize that they have made a special team, and they want the privileges of being a member of that team, it is amazing what they can do!

An old Boy Scout leader was once asked how he ran such a successful group. He said that the formula was simple: At the first meeting, the kids want to know three things: What are the rules? Are they going to be enforced? Will we learn something?

At the Seashore Storytellers, we try to follow those guidelines. Here are our rules:

First, age. I have found that sixth grade is the youngest age for the majority of children to be successful speakers. Now, there may be some precocious younger children, but it is difficult to take an entire class of fifth graders and teach them the same skills that sixth graders are capable of learning. By sixth grade, many more children

have conscious control over body movements. They can learn not to fidget. They can practice voice exercises and diction exercises because they can hear the difference in their speech. And, they can memorize a story. Our rule is that students who have been on the Forensic Team for at least a year and are in at least 7th grade may try out for the varsity Seashore Storytellers.

Second, memorization. I believe strongly in having the students memorize the story word-for-word. In the past, I have tried various techniques to skirt around memorization, such as visualizing a storyboard. These techniques work for me, as an experienced adult storyteller. They do not work for young tellers. I believe in memorization for several reasons. First, most children do not realize that they CAN memorize. They are amazed when they find out what their brain is capable of doing! Secondly, they take comfort in the fact that they can retrieve information during a performance. Most importantly, the unmemorized story does not flow smoothly with young tellers. It sounds more like cafeteria conversation: "So the woodsman, he goes 'Who's there?' and like, the wolf, he goes 'Me!'" Our rule is that students must memorize their stories by a certain date before a performance. I will not work with a student who has not memorized his/her story by that date, until the story is memorized. In order to try out for the Seashore Storytellers, a student must memorize a story and present it to the group.

Courtesy is a very important rule. Students must feel comfortable performing in front of the group. The courtesy rule states that when a student is performing, we are quiet and listen. We give positive feedback first. "Your character voices were great!" We give criticism in a positive way. "Is there a way you could use your body to show how angry the king is?"

The next rule is: perform, perform, perform! Storytelling is a performing art. In order to stay on the team, students must perform. The first performances are in front of other team members. The next performances are in front of audiences that the kids find encouraging and non-threatening. We entertain small children in day care centers, and elderly people in adult day care centers. We find that assisted living facilities are especially happy to have us entertain the residents, and the residents greatly enjoy the students. I would not recommend nursing home performances for young tellers because the residents of nursing homes are generally not able to remain alert and quiet during a student performance. Finally, when the students have achieved a certain level of "stage presence," they are ready to perform in more challenging settings. We have storytelling as a category in Forensic Competitions, our students tell stories at local bookstores and at storytelling festivals. In all the years I've coached storytelling, I have found that every team's greatest audience fear is the same. The students do not wish to perform in front of their class. They know who the hecklers are. I respect this wish and have never forced them to do this.

Fun is our most important rule. We always have a snack. Sometimes, we make up silly stories just goofing around. We always get pizza or ice cream after we perform. One of our great motivators is our end-of-the-year party. We make it a murder mystery party, and each student gets a role to play. They wait for that all year!

For my end of the bargain, I teach skills. We do voice exercises, diction exercises, acting exercises. They kids love them. They enjoy the feeling of achievement. Just yesterday, a new student came to us, wanting to try out. The varsity team members said to him, "Oh, you need to work on exercises to project your voice. We know how to do it. We'll teach you."

In my opinion, the best way to encourage kids to be storytellers is to give the kids what storytelling elders have long received in centuries past. Give them respect for their skills. Give them encouragement. And watch them perform!

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