

Kids as Storytellers: Let the Festival Begin! Or, Establishing a Storytelling Culture at an Elementary School

By Darlene J. Neumann

In May 1997, a brand new event took place at Sherwood School, an event that fired our imaginations and allowed audiences to experience the power of story. Five professional storytellers, along with every fourth and fifth grade student, entertained and thrilled audiences with two full days of stories at The First Ever Sherwood Storytelling Festival!

Although the first Festival was held in 1997, the foundation for storytelling and listening had been laid several years earlier. Parents and teachers in this school community have always understood that reading aloud to children is important: how often children have enjoyed the simple, stimulating activity of hearing stories read aloud to them is a predictor of success in school. Reading aloud to a child gives a positive view of books and reading. It strengthens not only reading skills, but also writing, listening, and speaking skills as well.

For years, children had been enjoying hearing stories read aloud in the Instructional Media Center (IMC) and in classrooms. However, beginning in 1992, students began listening to the IMC Director, who is a professional storyteller, tell stories regularly in the IMC. In addition, storytellers were invited yearly to the school for assemblies. As they developed their listening skills, Sherwood students became an exceptionally responsive audience for storytellers. As all storytellers know, an attentive audience is essential to any storytelling experience, but it is especially important for a student storyteller to be well received by a responsive audience.

The integration of storytelling into the curriculum began in 1995 when a classroom teacher and the IMC Director planned a Native American social studies unit together. Through this collaborative effort, storytelling in the curriculum began. Storytelling seemed a logical way to integrate literature into this unit. The IMC Director helped students choose stories and coached them as they learned to tell their stories. Each fifth grader told a Native American story to an assembly of fifth graders and their parents.

The following year, storytelling was introduced into a fourth grade social studies unit on Regions of the United States. Again, the IMC Director helped students choose stories, taking them through the process of examining the structure of a story and coaching them as they learned the story. Each fourth grader presented a tall tale, legend, Jack tale, or folk tale and in the cabin created in the hallway space between the two fourth grade classrooms.

Sherwood's principal, Mr. Paul Zavagno, was so impressed by the enthusiasm and the quality of the children's efforts, that he asked if the IMC director if she would like to do a storytelling festival! Needless to say, the answer was a resounding "yes!" And so, the festival was born!

Sherwood has celebrated nine annual storytelling festivals. Key elements that allow our festival to work are continued administrative support, cooperation from faculty and parents, financial support from the PTO, and integration of storytelling skills into the curriculum. The District Education Foundation provided two grants to purchase multiple copies of tellable tales to give students a wide selection of ready-to-tell tales.

With the help of the IMC Director and encouragement from their classroom teachers, children choose a story, make a story map, and begin the process of learning their story. Students often choose stories that they heard from other student tellers. Some students have even written to storytellers to ask their permission to tell a story heard at a festival or on a CD. Experienced student tellers may write their own stories, but the IMC teacher needs to approve each story and often helps children create the story. Teachers allow time for students to practice, and the IMC Director listens and coaches each child.

Sherwood has a Dual Language Program. Ten English-speaking children and ten Spanish-speakers begin kindergarten together. Children learn to read in their native language first, but by third grade, most of the children read in both languages. This has had a positive, enriching impact on the storytelling festival as many stories are told in both languages. Often, a story will be told in one language, followed by the same story in the other language. Children in this program may choose to tell their story in either language. While most tell in their native language, others enjoy the challenge of telling in their second language. At our 2005 festival, a fourth grade girl whose first language is English, translated a story from English to Spanish; she and two friends performed it together.

Because the IMC has a flexible schedule, time can be scheduled to accommodate coaching and practice sessions for two months before the Festival. During the week before the Festival, the IMC Director dedicates all her time to storytelling practice and coaching. In addition, students willingly give up recesses. Many lunches are shared in the IMC as younger storytelling club members are coached by older ones. It was the idea of one experienced third grade teller to teach first graders to tell. Four third graders coached four first-graders. What began as an experiment has become a vital part of the program.

The first Festival involved only four classes with about 60 tellers. In keeping with their curriculum, fourth graders told stories from countries with rainforests, and fifth graders told American tales. Because the Festival now encompasses three days with over 220 student tellers, scheduling is more of a challenge, but the benefits are well-worth the effort. One professional performs for all students, conducts storytelling workshops with the older tellers, and presents an evening family concert. The rest of the three-day period is divided into half-hour time slots. Each half-hour set includes about 20 minutes of story. Large posters with the schedule, listing tellers' names and titles of stories, are posted in the teachers' lounge. Teachers sign up to bring their classes to listen, and most sign up for at least two sets. The Festival is held in the school library. The library can accommodate audiences of three classes, and families and friends of tellers for that set. Children tell individually or in tandem groups of two or three. Students use microphones so that every audience member can hear the children comfortably. The IMC Director emcees each set.

Tellers are seated on chairs adjacent to the storytelling stage. They place themselves in the order in which they are telling. A teller stands up, is introduced, and the emcee adjusts the mike. While this is happening, the other tellers slide over to the next chair, and the student who has just performed takes the seat at the end of the row. This allows the audience to see how many stories are left to be told, and the emcee knows that the next teller is ready. However, the ability to move also helps to relax tellers who are waiting to tell.

This Festival has become nationally known in the American storytelling community. Sherwood tellers have presented in a Kid's Concert at a National Storytelling Conference, have led panel discussions at university workshops, and have performed in festivals, at senior centers, and public libraries. Sherwood's Festival has become the inspiration for several other student festivals and storytelling clubs.

While there are many benefits, both academic and personal, for young storytellers, the comfort and confidence gained in telling a story before an audience is a valuable, real-life skill. Through the years, nationally-recognized tellers have enjoyed telling at Sherwood's festival and listening to student tellers. When Donald Davis came to our second festival, he was struck by the confidence and poise which student tellers exhibited. He appreciated the low-key nature of the festival and was pleased to see the cooperation displayed by the staff and parents. Jim May said that the Sherwood tellers were among the best young tellers that he'd seen. He was impressed by how kind they were to each other during peer coaching sessions. He issued an invitation for Sherwood tellers to tell at the Illinois Storytelling Festival. Syd Lieberman said that the IMC was a magic place. He was thrilled to have students talk so knowledgeably about storytelling and have such a comfort level that they could invite themselves to have lunch with him in the IMC.

Besides curricular use of storytelling, Sherwood has a storytelling club at each grade level from second through fifth. Members meet during their free time, recess and lunch. A few first graders also join in the second grade club. While every fourth and fifth grader is expected to tell during the festival, younger members of the club have the option of telling at the festival. Peer coaching plays an integral part in the storytelling program. Experienced tellers coach younger ones.

While the Festival, storytelling clubs, and integration of storytelling into units of study is maintained, storytelling has continued to evolve at Sherwood, entering into the areas of writing and research. During the study of astronomy and mythology, fifth graders wrote their own myths and performed them in the sky dome borrowed from a local community college by a fifth-grade teacher. In the darkness of the dome, under the stars, students pointed out their chosen constellation and told their myth about those stars. Research-based storytelling has also become a viable option for presenting information gathered during research. A research-based integration of storytelling into the curriculum happened as third graders researched pioneers. Children made sense of all the facts they discovered by telling stories, putting facts into a form that was easily understood and remembered not only by the teller but also by their audience.

In this time of emphasis on the importance of test scores and increasing awareness of learning standards, it is important to realize how many State Goals are supported by storytelling at Sherwood. Examples include:

- Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations
- Use the language arts to acquire, assess and communicate information.
- Demonstrate individual skills and group skills necessary to create or perform story elements and characterizations.

Storytelling is fun, but the process of choosing and studying the structure of a story, learning it, and telling it supports reading and writing skills. Communication, imagination and visualization are strengthened. In our media-oriented society, we are constantly exposed to visual images. Because storytelling involves no visual cues except gestures and body language of the storyteller, listening becomes both an art and a skill.

For many years, the number one fear of adults in the United was the fear of speaking in public. Some polls now show that this public speaking fear has been replaced with the fear of death by violent means. How unfortunate that speaking in public is equated with death in the minds of most adults in our country! Sherwood parents often state that they could never have done storytelling as a child, and many say they are still uncomfortable speaking before groups of people. It is the hope of the Sherwood staff that our students will continue to feel comfortable speaking before audiences. We feel that the sooner children begin speaking in front of others, the easier it is and more natural it becomes. Our society values working together and sharing ideas. We need to have children practice and master this vital skill, and storytelling is an excellent, exciting, and achievable means to accomplish this goal, not only in their academic lives, but also for their future experiences.

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