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STUDENT STORYTELLERS: IF THEY TELL IT, THEY WILL LEARN*

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Storytelling is a powerful language arts tool only if students use it. Are your students about as eager to stand in front of the class and tell a story as they are to eat beets or take on a thousand page summer analytical reading assignment?

For hundreds of teachers the key is the right progression of storytelling activities. Don't start with students formally struggling through a story. That's the ultimate goal, the end point. Start with a foundation of carefully selected storytelling exercises.

I've found two that stand out as particularly effective, efficient, and power-packin'. They build a basic understanding of the process, and the self-confidence to use that understanding.

ONE-ON-ONE-ON-ONE-ON-ONE

Bill Weaton, a high school teacher in California, decided to fling his students into storytelling by sending them to Elementary School classrooms to tell. They resisted. They dragged their heels. Rehearsals grew sullen and lack-luster. He turned to the One-on-One-on-One-on-One exercise.

The One-on-One-on-One-on-One Experience

The experience of most teachers shows it is best to assign the One-on-One-on-One-on-One topic two or three days before the session. Tell the class to prepare a one minute story on that topic. Keep the topics simple and personal so that the stories will be easy to recall and hold in their minds while they tell.

One day before the session, you tell a story on the same topic. Don't make this a rehearsed and polished telling. It's fine if they see you struggle a bit to get your thoughts in order and the words right. This is, after all, exactly what will happen to them tomorrow.

For the session itself, have students pair off. All telling will be done one-on-one. These pairs sit facing each other knee-to-knee and eye-to-eye. They quickly agree on who is "#1," and who is #2." As soon as they are settled, you call, "Person Number 1 begin your story." Person #1 tells their story to person #2. Person #2 Listens.

You time the story, shouting, "Stop!" after one minute. Immediately you direct, "Person #2 begin your story." And they switch roles. Person #2 tells their story, and person #1 listens. Some teachers use coach's whistles for start and stop signals (a good idea since the room will get noisy). Don't allow any discussion time between stories. Make these transitions as rapid as possible.

As person #2 finishes their minute of telling, everyone switches partners and repeats the exercise. Finally they switch a third time to a person with whom they have not yet told, and each tells their story for a third and final time.

In just fifteen minutes a vast amount of telling and critical listening have taken place. Bill Weaton's experience is typical. He encountered little or no resistance or reluctance. They loved it and wanted to do it again and again. Enthusiasm and confidence both soared. After One-on-One-on-One-on-One they blossomed, able to throw their energy into real storytelling. Moreover, they gained a solid sense of effective story structure, pacing, and delivery.

Bill initiated a critique period right after the sessions to get student feedback. He found class discussions were inhibited since all had not heard the same stories. Quick written critiques worked better. He had them answer four questions: Which of the three stories you heard did you like, and why? Which scenes can you vividly remember and why? How did your story change over your three tellings? How did these changes improve your story?

Keeping these critiques on file gave Bill a good progress check on each student's telling.

In addition to its use to develop a general understanding of story structure and delivery, One-On-One-On-One-On-One's can be effectively used to develop key elements of a story students are developing to either tell or write. Have students do a One-On-One-On-One-On-One on their main character ("Why is my main character so interesting that they are worthy of being the focus of a story?"), or on the antagonist ("Why is my antagonist bigger, meaner and 'badder' than yours and how does he create great struggle, risk and danger for my main character?"), or even on the general flow of the story ("What happens in my story that is worth your time to hear or read?")

THE 30-SECOND WONDER

Once you've told stories and introduced your students to One-on-One-on-One sessions, it's time to hone their storytelling skills. Having students actually select, learn, practice, and tell a stories is very time consuming and stressful. It is often far more productive to use an exercise where the class as a whole can focus on a specific problem area (e.g.: voice projection, gesturing, characterization, word choice, etc.).

Enter the "30-Second Story," a most powerful storytelling exercises, and one which allows your whole class to quickly, efficiently, and dramatically focus on, and work on, any specific storytelling concept, technique, or skill.

Polishing the Rolling Stone

The basic set up for the "30-Second Story" is simple. Four students stand in front of the class and improvise a story. One student starts and tells for 30

seconds. The second takes over for 30 seconds, and so on until each person has told twice, each time for 30 seconds. You time the segments, calling "switch!" at the 30 second breaks. There are no pauses for thought between tellers. The second one ends, the next begins.

So far this sounds like a dreary story circle. But here any similarity ends. You see, this is just the shell, the framework, within which you can focus on any aspect of good storytelling. The power of the "30-Second Story" comes not from the **General Rules** (which set the basic framework of the exercise and are applicable to *all* "30-Second Story" sessions) but from the **Specific Requirements** (applicable to only the current session).

Pam Green, a Virginia 6th grade teacher, called her **General Rules** the "Five Musts," and worded them this way:

1. The first teller *must* identify the main character and her goal (what she wants to do or get in the story) during his/her first 30 second telling.
2. The second teller *must*, during his/her first 30 second telling, specify the obstacles, flaws, and/or problems which block this character from her goal if the first teller didn't. If the first teller identified an obstacle in his/her first 30 second telling, this second teller must present a second obstacle besetting the main character.
3. Each teller *must* tell about *this* character, goal, and obstacle(s) during both of their tellings.

4. Each student *must* continue the story line *exactly* where the previous teller left it. There can be no jumps in time or space in the story between tellers. And
5. The final teller *must* bring the story to some reasonable resolution during his/her second 30-second telling.

Special Requirements

In addition to the General Rules, you will create Specific Requirements for each telling. After meeting these requirements under the pressure of a timed, improvised story in front of the class, students will find it easy consider that facet of story writing or storytelling in the future.

Some commonly used requirements are:

Character Development. Require that each teller reveal two new bits of information about the lead character's history, likes, fears, etc.

Senses. We often describe only what we see. Richer stories come from engaging more of the listener's senses. Require that each teller include three, four, or all five senses during each 30 second telling.

Action Verbs. Verbs of state do little to fire a listener's imagination. Require that each teller use no more than two, or even one verb of state in each telling. Have the class keep track.

Modifiers. We all drop modifiers and speak in simple subject-verb sentences when we grow nervous. Hand each teller a slip of paper on which you

have written an object with several appropriate modifiers (e.g.: a long red string, or an empty brown bottle). During *each* of their two 30 second telling periods they must include that object with its modifiers in their story. The class' job is to detect what was written on each teller's paper. Each teller's job is to keep the class from successfully identifying their object. Tellers can succeed only by including other modifiers, thus disguising the one assigned to them. Soon searching for, and including powerful, descriptive modifiers will be automatic.

Eye Contact. Require that each teller maintain eye contact with the class when one signal (such as a green flag) is up, and avoid eye contact when some other signal (say, a red flag) is up. Soon everyone will know exactly what maintaining and not maintaining eye contact feels like, and can hold any audience with riveting eye contact.

Scene Description. Young storytellers often forget that, just because they can see each scene in their heads, the listeners cannot also see those scenes. Require that each teller spend half of their 30 second periods describing the scenes of the story.

Similarly, characterization, tonal variations, gestures, volume variations, voice characterizations, speech patterns, word choices, personal nervous habits, or any other facet of storytelling can become the focus of a "30-Second Story." As your students become more adept at the form of this exercise, you can give them two or three Special Requirements to accomplish during each telling session.

How to Use the 30-Second Story

It takes Pam Green ten to twelve minutes to have a group of four tell a 30 second story, and then discuss as a class the Special Requirements she gave that foursome. After this discussion, she lets a second group of four try a 30-Second Story with the same set of Special Requirements. Have the class compare and contrast, looking for improvement in the Special Requirements area. In 25 minutes, three groups (12 children) can try to create three different stories while focusing on the Special Requirement of the day, and the whole class will have watched and discussed that aspect of storytelling in some detail. If used only once a week, this technique will greatly expand your class' oral communication skill and mastery of effective story elements and structure.

Remember that making up a story under pressure, in front of peers, is much scarier than One-on-One-on-One-on-One storytelling. Introduce the 30-Second Story without Special Requirements. Then gradually build into more complex requirements always keeping the tone that of a light-hearted game.

Pam found her class responded most enthusiastically when she created a system of award points for the game. Tellers get points for successfully meeting General and Special Requirements. Class members get points for noting discrepancies, or for certain aspects of the Special Requirements. The race for points was on, and the class was hooked. They all wanted to tell because tellers could build more points. The audience was glued to every word, looking for points.

In one sense these exercises remind me of Dumbo, the elephant. Dumbo could fly all along. But he believed he couldn't unless he held that feather in his

trunk. A smart mouse said, "Okay, if that's what you believe, here's a feather. Now fly!" Once airborne, Dumbo couldn't be stopped.

Many students believe they aren't good oral communicators, or storytellers. Appropriate storytelling exercises, like Dumbo's feather, give them the confidence to stretch their verbal wings and fly. But the exercises I describe here do much more. They create a fundamental understanding for the process and form of a story and of storytelling while rapidly advancing development of all student language arts skills.

I say, "pretty good!" – especially since your students will call these exercises "fun games the teacher lets us play."

THE END # #

REFERENCE for making your stories work at home, work and school:

Haven, Kendall. *Write Right! Creative Writing Using Storytelling Techniques*. Engelwood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999.

Haven, Kendall. *Super Simple Storytelling: A Can-Do Guide for Every Classroom, Every Day*. Engelwood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2000.

Bio Summary:

West Point graduate and former research scientist turned award-winning author and master storyteller, Kendall Haven is the author of 25 books including ten collections of themed historical stories, and his four books that present his break-through systems for using and teaching stories, story writing, and storytelling in the classroom: *Write Right*, *Super Simple Storytelling*, *Get It Write!*, and *STORY PROOF: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*. Haven has 25-years experience as a touring, professional, master storyteller, and has performed for over four-million people in 44 states at schools, conferences, festivals, and theaters, and has won numerous national and regional award for both his story-writing and his *storytelling*.

He also has conducted workshops to over 40,000 teachers on the effective use of stories in the classroom and on better ways to teach creative writing, and to over 250,000 students on story-writing and story-telling techniques.