

# ***TELL TALES: Create a Storytelling Festival with Your Class***

**By Tom McCabe**  
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I discovered my career as a storyteller when I looked right instead of left. It was 1973 and I was a very tardy undergraduate literature major, cutting through the theater building, dashing to class. No matter how late I was, it was my habit to always look left, gazing through the windows at the coeds basking in the sun. However, on this fate-filled day, I glanced right and noticed that the door to the theater was open. Being a true descendent of Pandora, my curiosity got the better of me; I skipped class and wandered in the darkened theatre.

On the stage, in a single shaft of light, was a sole figure. He began to spin a tale. I took a seat. Twenty minutes later I awoke, having been utterly transfixed and transported. The entire tale had played itself out inside my head. This was a revelation. One voice, one body, one person had somehow embodied all the elements of theatre, creating an entire world. He had evoked the scenery, the costumes, the characters, even the lighting, all in my mind. He had been the playwright, creating dialogue and building tension through foreshadowing and vivid descriptions. He had been an entire company of actors smoothly flowing from character to character to narrator. I was fascinated.

The creative world of storytelling is easily available to you and your students, whether they're sixth graders or seniors. A storytelling program will challenge your students to consider and use all of the elements of theater without requiring any production support; no set building, no costume switching, no complex lighting. The words and performer receive the attention, providing lessons that apply to later work on scripted pieces with design demands as well. The goal of this article is to help you develop a storytelling unit that will culminate in a festival in which all of your students can successfully participate and perform. Have no fear. Creating a storytelling festival is quite simple.

## ***398.2, a storyteller's favorite number.***

Every good project begins with research. Before you introduce the idea of storytelling to your students, visit the school library and your local library to establish many options. The Dewey decimal designation for folklore is 398.2 Ask your librarian to help you inventor the folklore section. (Alert the librarian that you are about to send a group of young, hungry eager tellers in search of tales.) The inventory will guide you as you set up your storytelling program. You can modify your planning to the extent of the librarian's collections and the size of your class. Here are a few variations.

Make a list of all the countries that are represented by specific volumes in the folklore section. Don't worry if the tale number of a country represented exceeds the number of your students.

If your library has a limited number of folklore books, you may have to sift through the folklore anthologies, selecting and copying stories from various world cultures. This will prove more difficult, as you will want your students to have options. Ideally, each teller should have at least three stories from a given culture from which to choose.

You also have the option of narrowing your festival focus by sharing the stories of a particular continent, country, culture, or people. The challenge here will be securing enough source material. However, the benefit in narrowing the focus is that you can create a cultural event that compliments and enhances our school's specific educational goals and/or reflects the diversity within your community. I have seen festivals that have dealt with habitats, cultures, and even specific historical epochs. Again, start with an inventory of your library's resources.

Finally, ask the librarian for a list of audio storytelling recordings. Most libraries have at least a modest

collection of recorded stories. Based on your librarian's recommendations, check some out and listen to them, perhaps as you drive to and from school. These recordings will give you a sense of the true potential of storytelling.

As a classroom introduction to the art of storytelling, play a few of our favorite-recorded stories for your students. Turn off the lights and encourage them to listen, relax, and imagine.

Next, consider supplies. Have students create a ring binder with some notepaper inside; this will be their storyteller's workbook. These notebooks, a simple one-page festival program, and some photocopies are the only supplies required for the entire project. You may want to use the workbook contents as part of an assessment of the student's progress during the unit.

Now circulate the list of topics and ask your student to select and sign by a country, a continent, or a culture on which they wish to focus. Once the students have made their choices, send them to the library to begin to research stories. The story should have no more than three speaking characters; it can have more characters but only three "voices." You might inform your storytellers that children may be attending the festival, so they should stay away from tales that would be gory or too scary. (Some of the old folk tales can be pretty strange.) Ask them to read at least three stories from the culture they have selected; they may wish to read additional tales until they have found one to their liking.

Encourage your students to take care with their selections, as they will be working on the story for a long time. Sometimes, this endeavor can be a boring proposition. At least one of your students, probably more than one, will ask to switch stories. Encourage them from the beginning to make their selections carefully. Do not allow them to change or swap stories. Have them see the process through to the end. Getting bored with a story you are developing is a part of the process. Challenge them to make their current story more interesting. If you are not convinced about this, remember, if you allow one student to change a story, every student asks to change. Be firm.

### ***Talk-about and details***

After each student has selected his or her first choice, assemble the class to introduce their tales and do a "talk-about." A talk-about is a simple recounting of the story, the synopsis, the characters, the basic action, and a few details. Your student isn't asked to tell the story, just talk about it. This gives them a chance to get a taste of storytelling in the safest possible way, while giving you an opportunity to review each story. Listen to each closely. If you feel a particular story is inappropriate, now is the time to send the student back to select a new one. You might also encourage all of your students to listen each of the tellings. They might get ideas for their own stories. When you feel comfortable with the stories your students have chosen, have them copy the text and add it to their binder.

Next, have your students take the story home and carefully read it at least three times. Instruct them that once the stories have been read, they should set aside the printed talk and draft a list of every aspect and detail of the story. This list will free them from the printed story and allow them to make the tales of their own, as well as give them to make the tales their own, as well as give you a written element to assess. Each entry on this story list should be no more than a mere prompt of one, two, or three words. Included on the list should be every detail the student can remember, plus embellishments—details the student would like to add to enhance the story. With each change, the story becomes more of the student's own.

Explain to your students that they would not memorize the story. Not only is it not any fun, but if you forget a single word, you will forget the entire story. Instead, try to see the story playing out in your head and tell us what you are seeing, feeling, and experiencing. Constant visualizations keep the story fresh, alive, and ever evolving.

Continuing the homework, each student should stand and tell his or her story, using the list

as a memory aid if necessary. The goal of this project is for every participant to create a seven-minute story. Most young tellers are shocked at how long seven minutes truly is. Ask your student to time their stories as they rehearse at home. Recommend that if the story ends before the seven minutes is up, they should stand up and wait for the time to expire. Although the silence may be uncomfortable, it will help them get a sense of how long the story will have to be.

### *In-class activities*

While the students continue to work on their stories at home, there are a number of activities that you can introduce in class to help them better develop their tales. Each exercise can include a brief example that you do together before students apply the techniques individually. *Change the shape of the stories.* Have your students take out their story list and draw a circle around an idea on it. Now, they are to tell the story aloud but instead of following the list from top to bottom, they should bounce around the list, starting with the idea they circled and using up the ideas and details as they wish. The story should still make sense. They can do this telling one at a time, although I have found it works just as well, sometimes even better, when everyone talks at once. What students will discover is that the shape of the story is completely the choice of the teller. If students are particularly adventurous, have them circle the last detail in the list and tell the story from the bottom to top. It sounds quite difficult but this activity is actually lots of fun.

Telling the story from different points of view: Have your tellers attempt to tell their story in the first person, taking the point of view of one character. Prompt them with these questions: What sort of language might this character use? What might this character not be able to understand or know? If you have a dedicated group, have them tell their stories from the point of view of each character. When your tellers return to their story lists, these experiments will give them details and bits of dialogue to add to the story.

Focus on language: As your students have their stories, there are many opportunities to focus on language and usage. Consider complexity of vocabulary. Have your tellers list some of the verbs, adjectives, adverbs and nouns they are using, especially words they repeat. Then send them to a thesaurus to find interesting and exciting substitutions.

Create similes and metaphors: One of the most vivid aspects of well-told tales are similes and metaphors. Creating them is quite simple. To create a simile, have your students generate a list of action words from the stories. Following each action word, place the word "like" and a blank. Fill in the blanks and you have a collection of similes. For example, he danced like a tornado. To turn a simile into a metaphor, drop the like, replace the action verb with a being verb, and combine the verb and the simile. They may sound complex but consider the following examples: he was a dancing tornado, or, he was tornado dancer.

Vary the degree of description: Another enjoyable aspect of story shaping is focusing on degree. This activity centers on the word "so." Follow a "so" with an adjective, the word "that," and a blank. For example, he was so tall that he could wash his face with a cloud, or, he was so light that he carried bricks in his pockets so that he wouldn't blow away.

### ***Periodic Evaluation***

In order to prepare the stories, tellers will need to perform the story ten times before the festival. The repetition guarantees that the teller has thoroughly explored the story. You don't need to find class time for all of these tellings. At least half of the rehearsal performance can be done at home, as long as the student sets up a true rehearsal situation in which he or she tells the story all the way through and allows himself or herself to make discoveries. I have found that most people pull up, maybe at three tellings or five or seven. They stop when they are bored. Being bored is a part of the process; encourage your students to keep working by trying the variations discussed above, or the following developments.

The story can and should change in terms of point of view, chronology, tone, length, and so on. Every time it is told, the teller should let it grow and change. Each time they have completed a telling your students should take notes. What part of the story changed this time? What fell out? What came in? Ten tellings allows your students a chance to explore. If they don't know what to focus on in a given rehearsal, your students can look at their evaluation sheets and try to develop a new strength. Or you can recommend a focus or variation for each telling.

You, the teacher, will never have time to listen to all of these in-class rehearsals, although you should try to hear each story at least twice as it evolves. Enlist your students to serve as coaches. At least five times during the rehearsal process, pair up your students and let them perform their stories for each other. This helps with classroom management. It also encourages the shy ones; because everyone is taking, the only person listening is their partner. Also, all that noise helps with concentration so that the tellers will be ready for the distractions of an audience during the festival.

Before the pairs begin to rehearse, review the elements of the storytelling evaluation sheet, particularly the possible areas of focus. Emphasize the partner's role as appreciator, as opposed to critic. As your students listen to their partners, they should fill out the worksheet. The key to the success of these worksheets is the concept of appreciation. Listeners should do all that they can to identify the strengths of each story. They will also identify an area of the story that might be worked on, but this should be done in a supportive and gentle manner.

This worksheet, especially the list, can be modified to reflect the age and sophistication of your students. If you are judicious in pairing your students, you will be helping them not only to prepare their stories, but also to become sensitive and supportive coaches.

Each time a story has been reviewed, the tellers should take the evaluation sheet home, study it, and add it to their workbook. The goal for each storyteller should be to transform whatever has been identified as a new area of focus into a strength before the next telling. Students should also make revisions and continually add details to their story lists.

### ***The Festival***

As storytelling requires little or no technical support, organizing a storytelling festival is a straightforward manner. Schedule your festival for a week-day evening or a weekend afternoon or evening. The entire event will take just a little more than two hours. The performance venues for your festival will be your school's classrooms, although the event could easily be adapted for other sites in the community, too. As a final rehearsal, you may want to schedule class time for each student to tell his or her story for everyone.

This will be fun because the students heard the first tellings at the beginning of the project. The one thing I would suggest is to encourage everyone to truly work on appreciating the stories and not being too judgemental.

For the festival, divide your students into groups of two or three. Assign each grouping to a particular classroom. Follow your instincts on the best combinations of personalities and stories. For example, place only one truly shy person per group. When in doubt, organize the tellers by region or continent. Draft adults or older students to serve as hosts, one per classroom. Generate a one-page program listing tellers' names, story titles, room assignment, and the schedule.

At the outset of the festival, you may wish to meet with the entire audience in a large room or auditorium and hand out the programs. Introduce all of the tellers and then send them to their venues the process you have been working on and how the festival will run. They will circulate among the rooms, attending three sets of performance in forty-five minute segments.

The scheduling of the stories is simple. Plan for the audience to take a few minutes to choose their first venue. Once everyone is in place, the host will introduce the tellers and ask that the audience remain while all three tellers share their stories. Each teller performs after the host introduces his or her story. If each story is approximately seven minutes long, the entire performances should take no more than thirty minutes. When the performance is complete, allow a little time to answer questions, which the host can moderate.

The audience is then released to select another room. The second series of performances will begin forty-five minutes after the first, with the third performances beginning forty-five minutes later.

With this schedule you will have developed a true festival. Audiences will hear nine stories during the roughly two-hour program. Each teller will have a chance to share his or her story three times. Although you won't be able to hear everyone, you can circulate among the rooms to catch some of the performances. If you are looking for an additional means for assessment, you may ask the hosts to fill out a final evaluation form for each of their tellers. You may want to base the form on the areas of focus listed on the student worksheet, adding room to note overall impressions.

As you can see, a storytelling festival reflects the direct and simple nature of the art form and offers our students a chance to explore performance within a flexible, creative unit. You can join the fun and tell your own tale, too.

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