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STORYTELLING:

A Non-literate Approach to Teaching Reading.

A teacher-turned-storyteller describes his program for getting reluctant readers to read.

By Tim Jennings

I'm a professional storyteller; I tell (without a book) folktales from the vast and timeless repertoire of Euro-Afro-Asian-American "oral literature." When I go into schools to tell stories, the most frequent question teachers ask me is, "How did you ever get started doing something like this?"

The answer is simple: I did it to survive.

Some years ago, another teacher and I set up and ran an alternative educational program for 12 unusually difficult state wards, aged 10 through 16. The kids had been abandoned, or removed from their families because of neglect or abuse. They were poor. They came from treatment centers, orphanages, and the streets. Most had been in foster homes, from which they had been rejected as being unbearable. Many hadn't seen the inside of a public school for years.

Considering the mill they'd been through, it was not surprising that they were badly damaged people, and damaging to be around. Routinely and remorselessly, they lied, stole, broke things, threw tantrums, and abused one another. All were intolerable in ordinary classroom situations. A few could read, but rarely did so. Three could read very simple third grade material. The rest were nonreaders who had been in special programs as long as they'd been in school.

If kids can't read by age 12, you either give up and do something else with them, or you take a deep breath and make literate children your main goal. We didn't need to be back-to-basics fanatics to choose the latter course, and it turned out that the kids themselves wanted a "real school," with reading, writing, and math.

This expressed desire, though, was more a reaction against being "special" than a clearheaded determination to work. Sure they wanted to read-- almost as much as they wanted to love and trust an adult. But their experience was that adults were not trustworthy, and that special programs did not work. And so the kids had not only given up, they fanatically, explosively resisted any temptation to try again. Perhaps this was our main reason for teaching literacy: if against all expectations these kids found themselves reading, then other possibilities might also begin to appear conceivable to them.

A Futile Beginning

Base one in learning to read, I thought, was listening to stories read aloud. I'm pretty good at reading aloud, and looked forward to some enjoyable sessions. I expected difficulty on all other fronts, but here I thought we could relax and learn what reading was all about.

I was quickly disabused.

All the kids felt that being read to was demeaning-- baby stuff. The nonreaders actually seemed provoked to feelings of physical discomfort by the steady stream of words. They squirmed; they whispered and punched; they got loudly indignant with others for squirming and whispering and punching. I'd have to stop and intervene, the thread would get lost, and the exercise-- which was all it ever was-- would end miserably. I tried everything to make it work, including a hard-nosed "If you come to listen to a book, then you sit there, and you listen to the end." All I got from that was a broken window.

After nearly a year of this nonsense, I found myself returning from still another useless trip to the library with a van load of kids, all carrying the books that they had either picked out at random or sulkily agreed to examine, but that in any case would be forgotten until it was time to return them. After the wrangling and book dropping subsided, there came the subdued movement of settling in, and I suddenly remembered an ace I had up my sleeve. I knew a couple of folktales, and I could tell them pretty well. I hadn't tried them yet on these kids; I was shyer about storytelling than about reading aloud, and was afraid of getting my feelings hurt. But what could I lose? I took a deep breath and laid my card on the table.

"Anybody here want to hear a story? I know a good one."

"No, we don't want to be read to," Red said instantly. Jeff and Arnie turned their backs.

"I'm not talking about reading. I mean, I'd tell you a story. No book."

There was a pause. "What kind of dorky story is it?" Jem asked.

"It's about a boy named Jack."

"Oh, yeah, I know. Dack and dah Beantawk. Duh dee-duh dee-duh."

"No, you never heard this one."

"What," (withering scorn) "did you make it up?"

"No, it's very old."

"Then how do you know we never heard it?"

"I just know, that's all. It's about three brothers. It's called, 'Dimwit.'"

No comment; nobody wanted to commit himself.

“Hey, does anybody want to hear it? I won’t tell it if nobody wants me to.”

Jem muttered something.

“What?” I said.

“I said, OK, go ahead and tell your dorky story.”

“Once there were three brothers,” I began, as the kids looked out the windows at the gray, slushy landscape. “Their names were Tom and Jack and Will. Jack was the youngest, and his two brothers couldn’t stand him.”

Clara giggled. “It sounds like my sister. I hate her, and she hates me.” (This is what Clara always said on the subject of her sister.)

“There were a lot of things the two brothers didn’t like about Jack, but most of all the way he’d pick stuff up-- anything, garbage-- and put it in his pocket. So they called him Dimwit, and pretty soon everybody else did too.

“Now, the king of this country had a daughter...” The tale wound on, and by degrees, the kids started looking at me. After about five minutes Sam started whining about his seat and I took the necessary risk. “Look,” I said, “I can’t tell this story if other people are talking. I lose track. Do you want to hear it or don’t you?”

Another pause, then Jem spoke. “Shut up, Sammy,” he said.

The story ended just as we pulled into the driveway. The kids burst back into the world, screaming like jays.

Folktale Magic

I wondered why the kids had been so taken by this story, when all my earlier efforts had left them cold. I have two answers to that question:

First, the presentation was new. I had told a story rather than read one. My kids hated to read aloud so much that they didn’t believe it could be something anybody would really want to do. When I read aloud with an appearance of relish, they automatically assumed that I was faking, a practice as despicable to them as it was familiar. But they did like to talk and joke, and so could accept my enthusiasm for telling a tale that was, to me at least, genuinely worthwhile. Further, whereas written literature employs many literary devices that require a deceptive degree of listener sophistication before they can be accepted as natural, an oral tale sets up no such stylistic barriers to understanding and enjoyment. The oldest folktale can be told in language the listeners easily grasp.

Second, the folktale itself has a kind of Darwinian magic to it. It has survived over the centuries, and has the authority that goes with vigorous old age. Its elements (in the case of “Dim-wit,” the hateful brothers, the stubborn princess, the arbitrary king) speak to the real experiences of adults and children alike with a directness modern writers of “relevant” stories could only envy. All phony or extraneous allusions have long ago been sifted out. The folktale has been refined into an almost ideal “non-literate” literary form.

After that memorable car ride, requests for more stories weren’t slow in coming. I didn’t always oblige, choosing my occasions carefully, but soon I’d told all the folktales I knew two or three times. Gerry, a new student, came to my rescue. He brought me a book that had sat ignored on the bookshelf all year. “Look,” he said, pointing to the spine. “It says ‘Jack Tales.’ Get it? ‘Jack Tales!’” He opened the book excitedly and tried to read a sentence: but the dialect proved too difficult. The pictures were interesting, though, and he recognized some of the tales I had told. “Tell us some of these other ones,” he said. I explained that I couldn’t tell one that I didn’t already know, but that I’d be glad to read a few aloud. He didn’t know any better: he agreed readily, and some of the other kids came drifting over.

I read through the whole book (*Jack Tales*, by Richard Chase, Houghton Mifflin 1943) in several sessions. The kids were as pleased as I was, and demanded more. I pulled out *Grandfather Tales* by the same author, and we read that too, followed by some of Andrew Lang’s Fairy Books. From these it was a simple step to CS Lewis’ *Narnia* books, then to JRR Tolkien. One day we read from *The Hobbit* for two and a half hours, all of us piled on the couch, my arm around Sam, Jem turning the pages. I sensed we were home free.

“You can learn to read here.”

The step from listening to reading and writing was neither automatic nor easy, but it was POSSIBLE. The kids began to relax enough for my coworkers and I to get an idea of what they could and couldn’t do. Instruction in the mechanics of word recognition and sentence comprehension took on new purpose and life. The kids would read with me, one-on-one or in small groups; and they started reading stories to one another. Sometimes we had three separate story groups going at once.

Writing class took on new interest too. Even the slowest kids began to wake up and write, word by painful word, fantastic stories of their own. Some of the stories were read aloud to the whole class. Soon we had enough material to begin putting out a school magazine, which was kept on the shelves with the other books. Kids took to browsing through the shelves and finding books they liked, elements from which cropped up in their own writing. Arnie undertook a long serial, which his audience made sure he didn’t abandon; every time he completed a new installment, the class demanded that he read the whole thing from the beginning. This became a common practice. Al, a kid who usually tired after reading one paragraph aloud, ended up with a 14-part saga that finally took him 20 minutes to read aloud, slowly, stumbingly, but to the end. The kids applauded him.

Which leads me to another point; the kids were getting nicer. Where before one student would draw strength from putting down another who was weaker in some area, now kids began finding support and courage in others' progress. Near the beginning of the following year, Sam would tell a frustrated, angry newcomer: "That's right, you can learn to read here. Remember back at the center, I couldn't do it at all? Look at what I'm reading now!"

AFTERWORD

The events described took place about 1975. I co-ran that school for four years, after which (a) I'd had enough-- I was the only person, child or adult, who was still there from when I'd begun-- and (b) in order for the school to get state funding, the group home had to replace me with somebody who had a degree in special education. So I became a full time storyteller, which has suited me very well ever since.

About half the kids in the group home seem to have gone on to have reasonably good lives; the rest have been in and out of jail. I used to bump into them from time to time-- they seemed to remember me and the group home fondly, for the most part.

Despite considerable temptation, I've not rewritten it. There are many other ways to use storytelling in a school setting. As an artist in residence, I've taught many classes of children to tell folktales to each other and to younger children, for instance, sometimes in groups not unlike the one described here. Once I did this in a group that included "Clara's" son-- but all that, as they say, is another story.

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