

# The key to stories and storytelling

How to make reading more fun (and less scary) for your students.

By Rica Bolipata-Santos

## In the beginning

At the start of each school year, I begin my reading class by asking: is it possible to learn from stories? How—and why—can stories teach us about ourselves and about life in general?

Don't we learn from experience directly? And yet, something about reading makes it possible for us to see other places, meet new people, and try out experiences that normally wouldn't happen to us. How is it that fiction can help us know more about the real world?

## Learning through stories

We can learn from books because stories provide insights into real-life situations, no matter how fantastic their settings may be. When a character experiences a conflict (even one with magical powers like Harry Potter), we are able to place ourselves in his or her shoes. We undergo the experience as well. In this way, stories help us grow as human beings by engaging our minds, by activating our creativity, and by affecting our emotions.

Nothing is as thrilling to a student as being able to understand the story. When we work to understand a piece of fiction, it's almost like working to find our own selves. Fiction allows us to be

ourselves by giving us the opportunity to walk in somebody else's shoes.

## The act of storytelling

Apart from reading and analyzing stories, I like to discuss the very idea of "storytelling" in class. Before or after a story is read, my class discusses the ancient and instinctive urge to tell stories in general. We also focus on how the story was told.


Taking the time to know how and why stories are told allows us to learn even more about the human race and it also deepens our understanding of the story we're studying. How does this happen?

### 1. Talking about storytelling demystifies stories.

Students can be intimidated by reading stories. They may think that stories in textbooks are very serious, often hiding a hidden message they have to dig for. Talking about storytelling teaches them that it's as natural as the air we breathe. Stories are often told and repeated at gatherings—favorite jokes,

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humorous, shocking or sad things that happened to people, fond memories of days gone by. This teaches students that for human beings, stories are one of the oldest and most effective ways to communicate who we are.

## 2. Talking about storytelling makes them more aware of how fiction is made.

I believe stories are based on an author's "crazy theory." This is what we usually call the "theme" or "lesson," but I've found that the term "crazy theory" is much more effective with kids! When an author has an idea such as what love really is, or what friendship means, or why people are greedy...this idea becomes the basis of the crazy theory. The storyteller reveals the theory as the story unfolds. So we look for this theory in stories. We study how the plot supports the theory: Why did the author start his story during a storm? Why is the author using a love triangle to support his crazy theory? Why must this character die and not another? This way, you are not assessing if the theory is correct, but rather how the theory is built.

## 3. Talking about storytelling brings out the natural storyteller in students.

Demystifying stories and seeing how stories are made activates the storyteller in many students. They begin to see that their own stories are interesting, that there are other ways to tell a story. For example, will this story be a funny one or a serious one? Would it be more effective told dramatically? Students become more conscious of how storytelling is employed in the home to pass on rituals, traditions, and family identity. It makes sense to them now why their parents begin every lesson with a story from the past. In a sense, it reconnects them to everything that makes them human.

When you discuss the story itself as well as the act of creating it, you ultimately train your students to think critically. It takes a lot of thinking to figure out stories. You need to be able to understand plot and symbolism and character. It takes critical thinking to look at how stories are made. Hopefully, at the end of the semester, your students will leave the classroom not only loving stories, but telling stories as well. •

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