

RESOLVING CONFLICTS: CULTIVATING YOUNG MINDS THROUGH STORYTELLING

Dr. (Ms.) Navleen Kaur*

Abstract

Developing societies have been surviving on the tradition of storytelling in the family. Over the centuries, storytelling has served the ancient and diverse cultures. It has predominantly been an oral form, including gestures and expressions. Its indications have been found in the painted symbols from stories on the cave walls, which provided a means of helping the storyteller remember the story. The story was then told using a combination of oral narrative, music, rock art and dance. Conventionally, generations after generations have made use of this method to teach their young-ones' about their culture, religion and traditions, by listening to stories from their parents. The first lessons of the child to understand the world and each other have been through storytelling. Children in their formative years even today are looking for guidance, as they develop their self- concept, identity, social skills and responsibility. With the breaking of the joint family system in India, children are devoid of the oral narratives, which was the forte of the grandparents. Therefore, the job of the teacher becomes more demanding. The young-ones' should be taught survival skills and adapting themselves to the environment around them. To meet these objectives, diverse learning styles can be adopted in the classroom settings. This paper would precisely deal with the pedagogical aspect of storytelling for resolving conflicting situations.

Key Words: Story-telling; Narrative; Conflict; Art of story-telling; Formative years; Learning styles ; Social skills.

* Associate Professor, Department of Community Education and Disability Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh (India)

Introduction

Human knowledge is based on stories. The human brain acts as cognitive machinery which is needed to understand, remember and further tell stories. Stories mirror human thought as humans think in narrative structures and most often remember facts in story form. Facts can be understood as smaller versions of a larger story, which can further develop analytical thinking.

The art of storytelling is gradually losing its grip in various communities because of war and conflict, breakdown of families, and due to the advancement in technology. But even today also it has proved to be a powerful tool for building peace in divided families and communities. Stories can provide opportunities to resolve conflicts and help people to forgive and reconcile. These lessons which the older generation had learnt in their shaping years seem to have faded, thus creating unrest in society. Storytelling has gained its importance in the present times specially for shaping the lives of children and youth. Acquiring social skills can help them to exert control over their actions and manage suitable relationships with family, friends and the community in which they live. The key responsibility falls on the teacher, who has to put on varied roles to shape the young minds.

Storytelling among adults is often used as a tool for entertainment, where they sit together and converse. They narrate and share their life's rich experiences, which have made them seasoned and wiser. But this can also prove to be a powerful means for building peace in divided families and communities. It has been seen that the warring countries have resolved their disputes with the help of United Nations mediators, who through storytelling helped the countries to gain peace.

Stories can provide opportunities to resolve conflicts and help people to forgive and reconcile. Storytelling helps in consoling those who are mourning their departed or other kinds of losses. This gives a feeling that they are not alone in the crises; that others have 'heard' their experiences. The listener can hear a story and understand events through someone else's eyes and ears. When facilitated skilfully, the storytelling process can help communities develop plans for healing and development. However, we should

use prudence as some stories encourage tribalism, factionalism and communalism. Stories can be used to enforce and coerce, so careful selection is important.

An art form

Stories are kept alive by being re-told again and again in oral traditions. The material of any given story naturally emancipates and adapts itself during the process. As and when print media took over the oral tradition, the fictional idea of the writer changed people's insight of stories themselves. In the succeeding times stories were inclined to be seen as the work of individuals, rather than a collective effort.

According to Reynolds (1978) "A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species homo sapiens – second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our day's events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths." A story is something that comes from outside. But the meaning is something that emerges from within. When a story reaches our hearts with deep meaning, it takes hold of us. Once it does so, we can let it go, and yet it remains with us. We do not get tired of this experience.

Story or a narrative is defined as an aesthetic enterprise. There are a number of artistic elements which include the narrative structure, with specific beginnings, middles and endings, normally constructed into logical plots, "the sound of the human voice, or many voices, speaking in a variety of accents, rhythms and registers" McKeough, A., et al (2008). It possesses a narrator-like voice, which "addresses" and "interacts with" audiences by drawing associations, references, allusions, similarities, parallels, etc. to a description of identity development with an effort to reveal it in character and community.

Accentuates learning

Storytelling is a means for sharing and interpreting experiences. Stories are universal as they can bridge cultural, linguistic and age-related divides. According to Lord (2000) Storytelling can be used as a method to teach ethics, values, and cultural norms and

differences. Learning is most effective when it takes place in social environments that provide authentic social cues about how knowledge is to be applied. According to Reynolds (1978) Stories provide a tool to transfer knowledge in a social context.

Stories are effective educational tools. Through this the listeners are engrossed and therefore remember. In the storytelling process the listener is occupied in visualizing new perspectives, inviting a transformative and empathetic experience, creating lasting personal connections, promote innovative problem solving. The listener can then activate knowledge and imagine new possibilities. Together a storyteller and listener can seek best practices and invent new solutions.

Stories are largely based on experiential learning, but learning from an experience is not automatic. Often a person needs to attempt to tell the story about that experience before realizing its value. In this case it is not only the listener that learns, but also the teller who becomes aware of their own unique experiences and backgrounds. This process of storytelling is empowering as the teller effectively conveys ideas and with practice, is able to demonstrate the potential of human accomplishment. Story taps into existing knowledge and creates bridges both culturally and motivationally toward a solution.

As an essence for living

Storytelling is a key leadership technique because it is quick, powerful, free, natural, refreshing, energizing, collaborative, persuasive, holistic, entertaining, moving, memorable and authentic. It is more than an essential set of tools to get things done. It is a means which leaders adopt to represent the change they seek. Rather than merely advocating, leaders establish credibility and authenticity through telling the stories that they are living. It is inherently well adapted to ignite change, communicating who you are, enhancing the brand, transmitting values, creating high-performance teams, sharing knowledge, taming the rumour mill, leading people in to the future. Storytelling translates dry and abstract numbers into gripping pictures of a leader's goals. A narrative links a set of events in some kind of causal sequence. It is an important tool for management and leadership, because time and again, nothing else works. It can inspire people to act in unfamiliar, and often unwelcome, ways. Even logical arguments for making the needed changes do not help, but effective storytelling often do. Storytelling

is a phenomenon that is fundamental to all nations, societies and cultures, and has been so since time immemorial. Narrative is the instrument of continuing creativity, a power that inevitably pushes us forward into the unknown future, by building new worlds and structures. It is part of the creative struggle to generate a new future. Narrative advocates freedom, interaction, and organic growth. It is as interested in the unknown as in the known. Narrative is a key tool for leadership, because it helps us deal with organizations as living organisms that need to be tended, nurtured and encouraged to grow. Storytelling releases innovation, by generating the energy needed to change. Narrative helps us make sense of a world that is rapidly changing as compared to the conventional. It helps us cope with a future that is evolving unpredictably. It dwells in the experience of the people who act, think, talk, discuss, chat, joke, complain, dream, agonize and exult together, and collectively make up the society. Narrative is a tool for the instigators of change, who aim at continuing transformation and the creation of a fruitful tomorrow. Storytelling is more than just a tool. It is beyond any implement—almost a requirement of being alive. It generates fresh depth and breadth of perception. When we hear a story that touches us deeply, our lives are immersed with meaning. As listeners, we allow transmission which matters. Once we make this connection, we unavoidably move on in our daily life with a difference, as a fundamental change in understanding has taken place.

A story is something that comes from outside. But the meaning is something that emerges from within. When a story reaches our hearts with deep meaning, it grips us. Even though we let it go, it still remains with us. We do not get tired of this experience. Once we have heard one story, we are hungry for another as it sends out the magic of connectedness between the self and the universe. Through narrative, we can let go the urge to control, and the fear that goes with it, learning that the world has the capacity to organize itself, recognizing that managing includes catalyzing this capacity, as well as sparking, creating, energizing, unifying, generating emergent truths, celebrating the complexity, the fuzziness and the messiness of living

Resolves Conflicts

Storytelling is at the core of conflict resolution. According to Sontag (2000) in a circular way, conflicts begin with a story and are also resolved by recreating, merging, or improving that story and creating a hopeful ending. It is a medium to bridge the distance between the field of conflict resolution and parents of young children because reading and storytelling are used with children starting at birth and help a child make sense of the world around them. Young children respond to methods such as storytelling, songs, and dramatic play. For example, parents can come close to resolving conflict by helping children to describe the different viewpoints of the story, brainstorm solutions, and create hopeful endings. Parents can also tell their children stories in which the characters demonstrate the abilities needed for the cooperative resolution of conflict. It was also observed that “these days many people lament the loss of civility among communities and families and attribute it to the transfer of storytelling a significant form of reflection from grandparents, extended family members and close friends to less personal media outlets”.

A Conventional Teaching Tool

The use of storytelling throughout human existence has been as a teaching tool to pass on the social mores. However, storytelling culture today is used mostly as entertainment and for recreational pleasure. In fact, the youth of today are exposed to the content on television and computer which does not model the behaviors society expects of our citizens. Behaviors like the ability to cooperate, to listen, to follow rules, and to have self control are now missing in the present world. Glamorizing undesirable lifestyles and behaviors in the media persuades our children to follow those storylines and misses an opportunity at creating a more responsible peaceful society. In native cultures storytelling was used as a teaching tool as well as a mode of entertainment during the long winters, when there was no electricity. The central reason was of helping the youth to understand the world around them.

An example of teaching stories:

Story-1

A Grandfather was talking with his grandson he said: "A fight is going on inside me. It is a fight between two wolves. One wolf is anger, envy, war, greed, self-pity, sorrow, regret, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, selfishness and arrogance. The other wolf is good, and friendly, he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, justice, fairness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, gratitude, and deep vision."

The grandson asked: "Grandfather, which wolf will win?"

The elder replied, "The one I feed."

Source: Guerin, C. (2009) Conflict Resolution Education in Early Childhood Development, University of Massachusetts, Boston

Story-2 Neighbors' in peace

*I am a man who can make peace,
I love my country very much,
How can I be killing my neighbour,
When he is a human being like me?
Why is my neighbour starving,
Hungry,
And I have food?
I am standing under the sun, which is surrounded by stars,
To swear that I will never leave you hungry, my neighbour!*

Questions for groups to discuss:

1. How do neighbours behave towards each other in your community?
2. How could you help your neighbour?
3. How could your neighbour help you and your family?

Source: Newell, K., Crowther, J. & R., (1998). Storytelling: A tool for promoting peace and literacy. United Kingdom: London

Such type of 'Teaching stories' help a child feel connected to a greater history or common human experience and give direction about what kinds of solutions or follies have been experienced by the people. Some of the most important qualities in stories for young children are that they address topics with which the child has some familiarity, expand the imagination, and that they provide a sense of hope for the future. In order to bring back the lost values and skills of storytelling in our communities, various workshops and group activities come handy for children as well as for parents. They are sensitized that conflict is a normal part of everyday life. It can be dealt with constructively or destructively. Conflict can be used as a tool for transformation. Constructive conflict resolution preserves relationships. Teaching children to deal with conflict constructively helps them in all aspects of life. Modeling behavior is the most effective method of teaching. Nature of Conflict arises from unmet needs like belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Conflict resolution occurs when individuals become partners in a search for a fair agreement that is advantageous to both. Parents can help their child's development by engaging in constructive conflict resolution behaviors.

Thus, narratives develop social skills which can help children learn to exert control over their actions and obtain suitable relationships with family, friends and the community in which they reside. Developing these skills can in turn reveal why learning is important in itself. These could begin with whole group instruction, which will introduce the text. Through whole group instruction and modelling, the story elements and story sequence can be analysed.

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