



Tips for telling stories to children.

Ritual

Ritual is a way to alert the group to the fact that story time is about to happen. It could be the use of a rocking chair used only to tell stories in or a piece of cloth that comes out for story time. It could be a word or a phrase. Linda Goss, an African American teller shakes her rattle and calls out in a sing song voice, “story, storytelling time.” She repeats that a few times until the audience has no question about what is going to happen. In some Native America cultures the talking stick is used and is passed and the only person who can talk is the one with the stick. No one else is allowed to speak if they don’t have the stick in their possession.

You can create your own ritual.

Call and response

Using a word or a phrase that repeats sets up a pattern that is anticipated and expected. Children will look forward to this and the anticipation keeps them involved.

For example I use the word “Bunday” in my telling. In response the audience says “bunday”. In other cultures other types of call and response is used. You can create you own call and response with your group.

Repetitive language

Like call and response repetition is very effective and can not only engage the child but also help with language learning. This is also a way to teach new words and words in another language.

You can use a motion to show the word and then just use the motion and have the audience say the repeating word.

Movement

Movement is engaging and excites the senses. Children use their eyes for signals and when telling a story the use of movement with sound will keep their attention. When using movement make sure to practice in front of a mirror to refine the movements so that they are clear. Try learning movements that incorporate American Sign Language, that way you are not only moving but incorporating a second language. Make your movements slow and gentle unless you are trying to describe something of a different nature.

Adding second language

This can be important especially if there is a child of another culture or language in the classroom. It helps children become familiar with new words, a new language or a language that they are aware of in the home. It brings out the importance of the language of the child in the classroom who may feel strange or different by being the one who speaks a different language than the others. Using the second language empowers the child and gives other children the opportunity to be curious and interested in other languages.

Music

The use of instruments can add a lot to stories. Even if you don't play an instrument using the thumb piano or shakers or even the sound of a flute note can create a different atmosphere and enhance the story. Using a song in the story that children might learn to sing is another way to add music and give more depth to the story. Try little rhymes or use a drum or some percussion sound to add to the story. Think of rhythm in what you do, clapping or chanting or saying words or phrases in rhyme will add greatly to keeping children involved and interested.

Silence

This is probably the most important part of telling stories. When we hear a story we are encouraged to imagine as the story progresses. Allowing the audience space and silence gives them room to imagine more fully. An important thing about silence is to keep the energy of the silence and not let it drop. This means that when you are silent let it be a part of the story and not because you are trying to think about what comes next. Keep your eyes engaged as you are telling or reading and when you take a break don't let that energy of your eyes drop. The audience, no matter how old stays aware of the energy of the teller or reader and is affected by them.

Predictable language

This is not unlike repetitive language but differs in that predictable language is just that, it's words that the audience can predict will happen in the story. It may be because of a rhyme or what is obvious in the story and when the child or audience is allowed to engage in predictable language they are included in the story and the process. The use of predictable language empowers the child, giving them a voice and allows them to become a part of the story.

Pauses

Pauses are similar to silences but are generally shorter and should be treated with the same energy as silence. You can use pauses to make a point or to draw the child's attention back to you. You can also use it to wait for the attention to come back to the story. Sometimes when audiences are noisy I stop in the middle of the story and pause for a moment and this allows them to come back to the story as they realize that something in the room has changed. Often we want to speak louder or tell the group to be quiet but a pause can be just as effective.

Some other things to think about in telling stories.

Audience control

This is sometimes difficult and you will have to figure out how best to take control of each audience. I tell to a variety of ages and each age group presents a new challenge. Telling for first grade is very different to High school and sometimes it takes many trial and error sessions to figure out how best to stay in control. Using some of the techniques I stated above will help this greatly.

Control of the setting

By this I mean how you are in the performing space. Where you stand and how you face the audience. Making sure that no one is behind you and that the light is on you not behind you. Also its important to make sure that the audience is as comfortable as possible. Wait for the audience to be ready and include them in some way.

Watching the audience

As a storyteller my main role is to read the audience. There is nothing more deadly than telling or choosing a story that will not work with the group and sometimes you may not know that until you start to tell it. Then you have to pay close attention the audience reading how they feel so that you can make a clear decision about what to tell, how fast to get out of the story you started that you know won't work, how to pace the story you are about to tell, when to pause and when to stop and when to glare at the kid in the front. The story is most important but without the audience being with you it will not work.

Opening and closing of the story

How you start the story is very important. The audience knows whether or not you are in charge and will react to you accordingly. I often start by telling about myself and why I tell stories but when I tell to High school audiences I usually start just by telling a story, I go right into story mode, using the story to capture

their imagination and I try to get them into the story as soon as possible. I always use call and response no matter the age. For the closing I work on the story to make sure that I end with fullness, keeping my voice full and making sure not to drop the ending or the energy.

Telling stories to any adult by preparing the audience

I have found that I can tell almost any story to adults if I prepare the audience with the story. By filling them in on my intention they accept what I am sharing with them.

Here are some other points to think about.

Voices and voice quality

First and most important thing is making sure that your voice is full and rich and clear. I used to teach at Lesley college in Cambridge and I taught voice for storytellers. There were no storytellers I worked with who have even thought about their voices. Try taping your voice to hear what you sound like.

The other part of this voice section is using different voices for effects. Try playing with making other sounds, making your voice high pitched or low to be a woman or a man or making funny sounds to be an animal. Be careful though not to hurt yourself so practice first until you are comfortable with the different voices.

Noises

These can be with instruments like percussion sounds, or a hand clap or stomping on the ground or mouth noises, clicks or pops. Use these as effects to accentuate something in the story.

Rate and speed in telling

Some of this comes naturally for most people but sometimes you have to think about it and with practice you can acquire more speed in your telling. Speed can be effective and add excitement to a story, making the audience have a different experience of the story. Practice slowly at first before trying to build up speed.

Breathing

Think about your breathing and practice taking full breaths so that when you are reading or telling you are in control of the sound. We often don't think about our breaths until we realize that we are holding it or not using it properly and practicing breathing while speaking can be effective and very helpful for long phrases. Your breathing will affect the sound and quality of your voice and affect how you come across to the audience.

Props

Props need to be used carefully but can also be very effective especially for little children. Some storytellers use puppets as props and these should be practiced in front of a mirror to be most effective.

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