

Why Storytelling Matters

Unveiling the Literacy Benefits of Storytelling

DENISE E. AGOSTO



Figure 1. An example of visualization

Storytelling is a long-standing tradition in US public and school libraries. Storytelling, not to be confused with story *reading*, involves telling a story from memory without the aid of a book or written script. Some tellers memorize their stories; others memorize the characters and events and freely tell their stories, varying them with each telling.

Many storytellers have written about the strong emotional connections that storytelling builds with listeners, about children's deeper engagement with live storytelling than with reading aloud, and about the literacy benefits of storytelling.¹ However, little research has tested whether or not these assumed benefits are real. To investigate the possible literacy benefits of storytelling, I analyzed thank-you cards created by children in a second grade class in response to a live storytelling session. The study findings show support for some of the previously assumed literacy benefits of live oral storytelling and point to the importance of continuing to offer storytelling events in public and school libraries.



Denise E. Agosto is Professor in the College of Computing & Informatics at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Libraries, Information & Society (CSLIS), and editor of YALSA's Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults. Her research and teaching interests focus on children's and teens' information behavior and practices, youths' use of social media, and public library services. She has published more than one hundred scholarly papers and two books in these areas and has received more than \$1 million in research grants and other awards for her work.

What Do We Know about the Literacy Benefits of Storytelling?

Most of the writing about the literacy benefits of storytelling in the professional literature has been based on observations from practice rather than on research findings. Authors of these pieces typically suggest that storytelling helps children to become better listeners and better readers while building vocabulary.²

A small body of research has tested these assumptions.³ Three of these studies are highlighted here.

First, Brian Sturm studied the trance-like state that listeners enter when they are deeply involved in listening to oral storytelling.⁴ He interviewed children and adults at a storytelling festival and identified six characteristics of the storytelling trance:

“Six categories emerged from the listeners’ descriptions of the storylistening trance phenomenon:

- Realism: the sense that the story environment or characters are real or alive
- Lack of awareness: of surroundings or other mental processes
- Engaged receptive channel
 1. visual (both physical watching and mental visualization)
 2. auditory (both physical hearing and mental “chatter”)
 3. kinesthetic
 4. emotional
- Control: of the experience by the listener, or someone or something else
- “Placeness:” the sense that the listener “goes somewhere” (often “into”) another space
- Time distortion: the sense that subjective time moves at a different speed than objective, clock time.”⁵

While Sturm didn’t address literacy directly, the deep engagement in story content that he identified has been tied to improvements in literacy skills.⁶

Next, Louise Phillips conducted a four-week storytelling program with preschoolers to study the usefulness of storytelling in early education.⁷ She found storytelling to build community among students and teachers, to enhance memory recall, to support early literacy development, and to promote creative thinking.

More recently, Jo Kuyvenhoven explored the storytelling trance with fourth and fifth graders.⁸ She found that during storytelling, children created mental pictures of the stories and often envisioned themselves in the story settings taking part in the action: “They made [mental] pictures and then slid into participation beyond the classroom walls and storyteller’s presence.”⁹ Again, this deep level of engagement has been tied to improved literacy.

Together these studies provide general support for the connection between oral storytelling and improved literacy, but they provide few details about effects on specific literacy skills.

Study Procedures

To begin to investigate the literacy benefits of oral storytelling, I worked with a class of twenty second-grade students in

a suburban public school in the Eastern United States. It is a Title 1 school located in a mixed-income, mixed ethnic/racial neighborhood. The study participants included nine girls and eleven boys, all aged seven or eight. Ten of the children were white, non-Hispanic; four were African American; three were Hispanic; and three were Asian American.

I told two stories of about fifteen minutes each to the students, who were seated around me on the classroom floor. It was the first time the class had experienced live storytelling. The first story was an original tale, “The Runaway Pumpkin,” about a boy who plants a pumpkin in his garden. It grows to an enormous size, and he rides it as it bounces out of his garden and across town.

The second story was based on a German folktale “The Three Wishes,” in which an elf grants a woodcutter and his wife three wishes in return for not chopping down the tree in which he lives. The woodcutter first wishes for a large sausage. His wife, angry that he wasted a wish, wishes that the sausage would stick to his nose. The woodcutter is forced to use his third and final wish to remove the sausage. A version of this tale can be found in Margot Zemach’s *The Three Wishes: An Old Story*.¹⁰

The children appeared to be highly engaged during the stories, frequently giggling and making appropriate comments, such as guessing what would happen next or yelling advice to the characters. I spent about five minutes after each story answering the children’s questions, such as, “Did the woodcutter ever get any more wishes?” After the stories and questions ended, I thanked the students for being a good audience and left the classroom.

Data Collection

When conducting research with children, gathering useful data can be difficult due to still-developing oracy and literacy skills. For this reason, I chose drawings as the main source of data for analyzing the children’s story responses. Immediately following the story session, the children’s teacher asked the class to create thank-you cards to send to the guest storyteller. She gave the children blank pieces of paper to fold into quarters to create cards. Beyond that, she let them create their own designs. She did write my name and the words “Thank you” on the chalkboard for children who needed spelling assistance.

After twenty minutes, she collected the cards, asking each student to “Tell me about your card.” She recorded the students’ responses verbatim.

Results

All twenty children completed the thank-you card task. Fifteen wrote words and drew pictures on their cards. Five wrote words alone—no drawings. Several drew more than one picture, resulting in twenty-four separate drawings for analysis. Each child wrote between thirteen and forty-nine words on his/her

card, with an average of twenty-five words per card. All twenty children provided verbal descriptions of their cards, ranging in length from twelve to forty-eight words, with an average length of twenty words.

I used the constant comparative method to analyze the words and drawings. The constant comparative method is the most common method for analyzing qualitative data.¹¹ Developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss for use in developing grounded theory, “the constant comparative method of data analysis is inductive and comparative and so has been widely used throughout qualitative research without building a grounded theory,” as it was used here.¹² The constant comparative method has most commonly been used to analyze qualitative data in word format, but it can also be useful for analyzing visual data, such as drawings:

With drawings, photographs, and/or videos, constant comparative analysis can be conducted to assess similarities and differences among the pictures. The similarities/differences are identified by selecting sections of the pictures to analyze, giving them codes, then grouping the codes together to create themes. As themes emerge, new drawings, photographs, and/or video clips are compared to these themes to determine where this new visual information fits in the overall thematic development.¹³

During iterative rounds of coding, the analysis progressed from initial descriptive codes of both the drawings and words (such as “pumpkins”) to more conceptual, inferential codes (such as “critical thinking”).¹⁴

The final coding scheme included four literacy benefits that children can gain from listening to oral storytelling. These include practice in visualization, cognitive engagement, critical thinking, and story sequencing. Each of these skills is described below with supporting examples from the data. They are listed in order from most to least supporting evidence in the data. Note, however, that the amount of supporting data is not necessarily a valid indicator of strong or weak connection between storytelling and each benefit, as some literacy skills are better

suited to detection through the study methods (such as visualization) than others (such as story sequencing).

Visualization

Visualization, or the ability to picture a story or other written information, is a foundational literacy skill, helping young readers to comprehend written texts.¹⁵ In describing their drawings, several children discussed having envisioned the stories as they listened. For example, pointing to her drawing of a pumpkin one of the girls explained: “This is how the pumpkin looked when I saw it in my head.”

As another example, figure 2 shows a tree that another girl drew in response to the story “The Three Wishes.” Her drawing shows that she was able to translate into visual form one of the key story elements.

In this same vein, figure 1 depicts the main character from “The Runaway Pumpkin” standing next to his garden. The drawing depicts the three key physical elements of the story: the protagonist, the pumpkin, and the garden.



Figure 2. An example of visualization.

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement has also been tied to improved literacy.¹⁶ If new readers are interested in stories or other reading materials, they are more motivated to try to understand them. Cognitive engagement is hard to determine after a learning activity has ended, but visual observation during the storytelling session showed rapt

attention and strong engagement on behalf of most of the children, with most laughing at appropriate points in the stories and many guessing aloud what might happen next or offering verbal advice to the characters.

There was additional evidence of cognitive engagement in the data. For example, one of the girls drew a picture of a figure on a pumpkin and wrote, “I am riding run-away pamkin” on her card, indicating that she imagined herself taking part in the action of the story. Other students reimagined the stories and offered alternate storylines. For instance, one of the boys wrote on his card: “In the three wishes he could of wished for a ton of

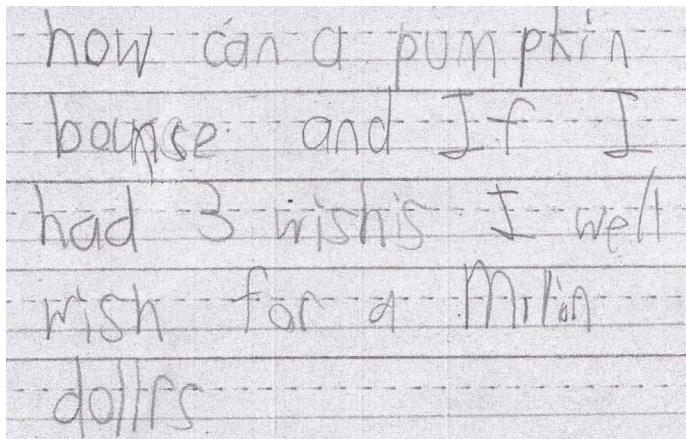


Figure 3. An example of critical thinking

gold and get a lot of \$." Another wrote: "If I had 3 wishis I well wish for a milion dollrs." (See figure 3.)

Critical Thinking

Of course, literacy skills involve more than just decoding and understanding words. Critical thinking is also an important component.¹⁷ Throughout the data, there were several examples of participants' applying critical thinking to the stories they had heard. For example, one of the boys showed evidence of critical thinking when he wrote on his card: "how can a pumpkin bounce?" (See figure 3.) Rather than merely accepting the unusual activity in the story as fact, he questioned it strongly enough to write his question on his card. Critical thinking is closely tied to cognitive engagement; both involve deep thinking about story content and meaning.

Story Sequencing Ability

The fourth and final literacy skill identified in this study is story sequencing, an important skill for literacy development.¹⁸ Story sequencing is the ability to identify different events in a story and place them in chronological order.

Three students each drew a series of vignettes from the stories, showing events in order, such as the series of pumpkins shown in figure 4. Each successive pumpkin is slightly larger than the previous one to represent the growth throughout the story. Arrows clearly indicate the direction of change—from small pumpkin to large—and serve as strong proof of the young artist's understanding of the order of events in the story.

Discussion

This single storytelling session enabled a class of second graders to practice at least four important literacy skills: visualization, cognitive engagement, critical thinking, and story sequencing. It's important to point out that this was a small, preliminary

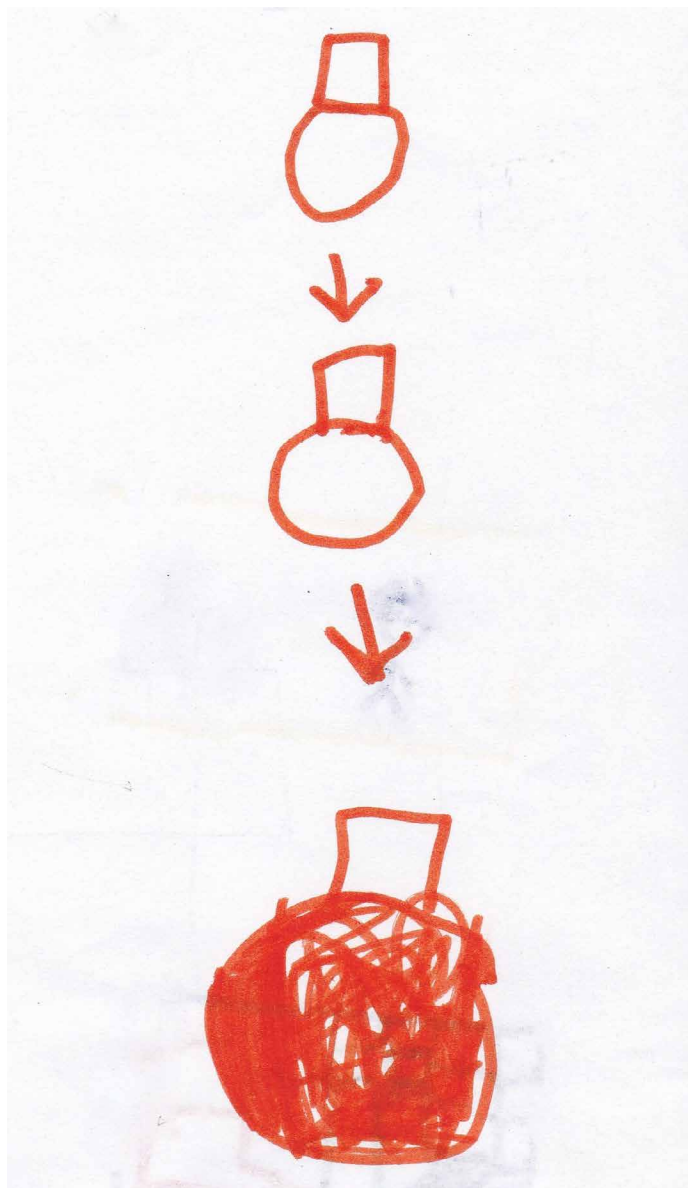


Figure 4. An example of story sequencing skills

study. While it offers strong evidence that storytelling is beneficial for literacy development, more research with repeated storytelling sessions, different delivery methods, varied types of stories, etc., is needed to determine the full range of literacy benefits of storytelling and the strength of their impact on literacy development. Nonetheless, this study adds to the growing body of work pointing to connections between live storytelling and literacy development, and it provides a strong argument for the continuation of storytelling in public and school libraries.

This study also shows that post-storytelling activities can enhance these literacy benefits. In creating their cards, the study participants demonstrated ongoing cognitive engagement and critical thinking in their drawings, written words, and oral descriptions of their work. Other follow-up activities to enhance the literacy benefits of storytelling, and that are well-suited to library settings, include:

1. **Follow-up questions.** Asking listening audiences simple follow-up questions related to story comprehension and reflection, such as: “When do you think this story took place?” or “What do you think happened after the story ended?” encourages ongoing cognitive engagement and critical thinking.
2. **Personal connection building.** Asking questions like: “What was your favorite part of the story and why?” “If you were the main character, what would you have done in her situation?” and “Have you ever had an experience like the one in the story?” helps children learn to connect stories to their own life perspectives and experiences. Learning how to make personal connections can help young readers to comprehend written texts more easily.¹⁹
3. **Reenactments.** Younger children often enjoy reenacting a story they have heard, thereby enabling them to become a part of the story. Reenactments don’t need to be fancy or involved; the storyteller can simply ask young volunteers to reenact the story as he or she retells it. Or, the storyteller can divide the audience into small groups and encourage each group to act out the story as s/he retells it.
4. **Retellings.** The storyteller can invite one or more listeners to retell a story after the initial telling to improve recall abilities and to strengthen story sequencing skills. Storytellers can also post audio or video recordings of their tellings to the web to enable children to listen again on their own.
5. **Connections to books.** Providing book versions of the stories (or of similar stories) for listeners to read in the library or to take home to read encourages continued thinking and reflection.
6. **Connections to other stories.** As another way to increase children’s critical thinking, storytellers can tell two similar stories or tell a story and read a book version of the same story. Follow-up discussions should focus on asking children how the stories correspond and differ.
7. **Response drawings.** As shown in this study, asking children to create drawings in response to a story they have heard encourages continued engagement with the story and helps to build visualization skills.
8. **Response writing.** Along these same lines, children can write poems, essays, or short stories after listening to a story. Storytellers can record children who are too young to write reciting their compositions.

Nearly two hundred years ago, Friedrich Froebel, the founding father of the kindergarten education movement, championed storytelling as an ideal method for educational delivery to young children.²⁰ Even in the digital age, when many public and school librarians are under pressure to focus programs and lessons on digital-skills building, traditional oral storytelling remains a vital cultural tradition and, as this study has shown,

a useful tool for helping new readers build essential literacy skills.²¹

There is another equally compelling reason to feature storytelling in public and school libraries: the joy that it brings to young listeners. In addition to showing that storytelling enabled the participants in this study to practice important literacy skills, the data also revealed the joy that many of them experienced during the storytelling session.

They wrote glowing reviews of the experience, such as: “It was so fun and so funny especially when the pumpkin jumped!” One student even drew a smiling girl’s face on her card. When her teacher asked her about the picture, she said: “I made me smiling at her during the stories when she told it, the stories.”

Live storytelling can bring joy to children and encourage them to view libraries and literacy in a positive light, helping to advance the core mission of libraries. That outcome alone is reason to continue providing storytelling for children in public and school libraries for many years to come. 📖

References

1. Cynthia Keller, “Storytelling? Everyone Has a Story,” *School Library Monthly* 28, no. 5 (February 2012): 10–12; Jerry Pinkney, “The Power of Storytelling,” *Horn Book Magazine* 91, no. 3 (June 2015): 29–30.
2. Dianne Butler, “Storytelling in the Classroom or Library,” *Mississippi Libraries* 76, no. 3 (Fall 2013): n.p.; Janice M. Del Negro, “The Whole Story, the Whole Library: Storytelling as a Driving Force,” *ILA Reporter* 33, no. 2 (April 2015): 4–7.
3. For a more comprehensive review, see Kendall Haven, “The Story of the Story: Research Support for the School Librarian’s Role in Teaching Writing,” *School Library Monthly* 26, no. 6 (February 2010): 39–41.
4. Brian W. Sturm, “The Enchanted Imagination: Storytelling’s Power to Entrance Listeners,” *School Library Media Research* 2 (1999), accessed August 8, 2015, www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/slmrb/vol2sturm/volume21999/vol2sturm.cfm.
5. Ibid.
6. For example, see Susan C. Cantrell et al., “The Impact of Supplemental Instruction on Low-Achieving Adolescents’ Reading Engagement,” *Journal of Educational Research* 107, no. 1 (2014): 36–58.
7. Louise Phillips, “Storytelling: The Seeds of Children’s Creativity,” *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 25, no. 3 (2000): 1–5.
8. Jo Kuyvenhoven, “‘What Happens Inside Your Head When You Are Listening to a Story?’ Children Talk about Their Experience during a Storytelling,” *Storytelling, Self, Society* 3, no. 2 (2007): 95–114.
9. Ibid., 111.
10. Margot Zemach, *The Three Wishes: An Old Story* (New York: Farrar, 1986).

11. Denise Agosto and Sandra Hughes-Hassell, "People, Places, and Questions: An Investigation of the Everyday Life Information-Seeking Behaviors of Urban Young Adults," *Library & Information Science Research* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 146.
12. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967); Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 175.
13. Nancy L. Leech and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, "Qualitative Data Analysis: A Compendium of Techniques and a Framework for Selection for School Psychology Research and Beyond," *School Psychology Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (December 2008): 599.
14. Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).
15. Dawnene Hassett, "Teacher Flexibility and Judgment: A Multidynamic Literacy Theory," *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 8, no. 3 (December 2008): 295–327.
16. For example, see Cantrell et al., "The Impact of Supplemental Instruction on Low-Achieving Adolescents' Reading Engagement."
17. For example, see Nancy J. Ellsworth, "Literacy and Critical Thinking," in *Literacy: A Redefinition* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 91–108.
18. Maggie Chase, Eun Hye Son, and Stan Steiner, "Sequencing and Graphic Novels with Primary-Grade Students," *Reading Teacher* 67, no. 6 (March 2014): 435–443.
19. For example, see Carter Latendresse, "Literature Circles: Meeting Reading Standards, Making Personal Connections, and Appreciating Other Interpretations," *Middle School Journal* 35, no. 3 (January 2004): 13–20.
20. Martha E. Gregor, *Storytelling in the Home, School, and Library, 1890–1920*. University of Oregon, Department of History, master's thesis (2010), accessed August 9, 2015, http://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/jspui/bitstream/1794/10639/1/Gregor_Martha_E_ma2010sp.pdf.
21. Del Negro, "The Whole Story, the Whole Library."

REMEMBERING KEATS' LEGACY



The winners of the 2016 Ezra Jack Keats Book Award proudly display their awards following a ceremony at the Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg this past spring. Pictured from left to right are Julia Sarcone-Roach, new writer honor for *The Bear Ate Your Sandwich* (illustrated by Julia Sarcone-Roach; published by Knopf Books for Young Readers); Megan Dowd Lambert, new writer honor for *A Crow of His Own* (illustrated by David Hyde Costello; published by Charlesbridge); Don Tate, new writer winner for *Poet: The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton* (illustrated by Don Tate; published by Peachtree Publishers); Phoebe Wahl, new illustrator winner for *Sonya's Chickens* (written by Phoebe Wahl; published by Tundra Books); Ryan T. Higgins, new illustrator honor for *Mother Bruce* (written by Ryan T. Higgins; published by Disney • Hyperion); and Rowboat Watkins, new illustrator honor for *Rude Cakes* (written by Rowboat Watkins; published by Chronicle Books). Photo by Kathy L. Dunn.