R&E-SOURCE https://journal.ph-noe.ac.at
Online Journal for Research and Education
Ausgabe 14, Oktober 2020, ISSN: 2313-1640

Perseverance, Performance, and Pedagogy in the Pandemic

The Power of Storytelling in Face-to-Face and Virtual Learning Environments

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Abstract

The 2020 Coronavirus pandemic forced teachers around the globe to adapt their in-person teaching praxes to virtual learning contexts. It also prompted professional storytellers to transition from live to virtual storytelling performances and workshops, making salient the flexibility of storytelling to provide educational content through a variety of modalities and contexts. Thus, one of the unexpected but positive consequences of the pandemic has been expanded opportunities for educators interested in the pedagogy and praxis of storytelling in educational contexts to take advantage of online high-quality professional development opportunities led by master storytellers from around the globe.

Keywords:
Storytelling in Education
Teacher Professional Development
Virtual Learning Environments

1 Introduction

Historically, the oral communication of stories was a salient educational strategy, not just an activity best suited to the very young who have yet to master the ability to decode text. Collins and Cooper (2005) aver,

> Storytelling is among the oldest forms of communication. It exists in every culture. Storytelling is the commonality of all human beings, in all places, in all times. It is used to educate, to inspire, to record historical events, to entertain, to transmit cultural mores. (p. 1)

Long before the invention of writing, the introduction of the printing press, or the prevalence of mass literacy, knowledge and ideas were communicated through the oral tradition (Foley, January 6, 2019). Perhaps the importance of a literate populace and the quest for mass literacy in modern societies led to a diminished role of orality and oral traditions in educational contexts. Yet, oral storytelling has unique affordances that make it well-suited and easily-adapted to many educational contexts and disciplines.

Good storytelling captivates audiences and, like other live performances, can be enjoyed as entertainment. This ability to enchant listeners also makes it an engaging, and instructive mode for delivering educational content. Importantly, research indicates storytelling promotes listener engagement, structures information, promotes conceptual understanding, fosters problem solving, and engenders a sense of community and belonging (Geanellos, 1996), attributes essential to good classroom pedagogy. In addition, neuroscientific research indicates storytelling can elicit "speaker-listener neural coupling" (Gowin, 2011; Shandur, n.d.; Stephens, Silbert, & Hasson, 2010), in which listening to a teller recount a story induces a pattern of activity in the brain of the listener similar to the pattern of activity in the brain of the teller. Thus, speaker-listener neural coupling, in which the brain activity of the listener is synchronized with that of the teller, may indicate comprehension and even empathy, key factors in interlocutor communication and understanding.

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It is also worth noting that storytelling has been used to support a variety of educational outcomes (e.g., Brady & Millard, 2012; Campbell & Hlusek, 2009; ElShafie, 2018; Geanellos, 1996; Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004; Love, Benefiel, & Harer, 2001), and researchers (Love, et al., 2001) have found that "storytelling has long been recognized as an effective teaching tool for almost every subject" (p. 243). Hence, storytelling can be a particularly valuable tool for educators who strive to scaffold students' understanding of new concepts and the acquisition of the knowledge needed to succeed in school. Yet, many educators may not be familiar with the pedagogy of using storytelling for instruction, may not have had opportunities to experiment with storytelling techniques and strategies, and/or may not have had opportunities to practice storytelling in classroom contexts.

2 The Modern Storytelling Movement

The modern storytelling movement[1] is multifaceted; it encompasses a variety of storytelling genres, including but not limited to folktales, fairytales, myths, legends, historical tales, ghost stories, religious stories, and personal stories. Some storytellers tell stories in many if not all of these genres; yet others specialize in only one genre. Similarly, some storytelling organizations (e.g., International Storytelling Center, n.d.; National Storytelling Network, n.d.; Northeast Storytelling, n.d.) produce events featuring a combination of genres, while others specialize in producing events featuring a single storytelling genre (e.g., The Story Collider, n.d.; Penn Nursing, n.d.; The Moth, n.d.-a).

Prior to the 2020 pandemic, The Moth (n.d.-a), a leading organization at the forefront of the personal storytelling genre in the United States, hosted a growing number of live storytelling events in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. In addition, The Moth produced radio broadcasts, podcasts, and online videos of storytellers, as well as books that feature print versions of the stories that were told live on stage at one of The Moth events (Burns, 2013, 2017; The Moth, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d, n.d.-e). The prominence of The Moth may have influenced the prevalence of other organizations that produce personal storytelling shows, as well as the status of personal stories and the tellers who tell them. The popularity and success of The Moth seems to have inspired a variety of smaller more local organizations in communities across the United States to provide regular opportunities for tellers to perform or practice personal stories.

Storytelling events vary not only in the genre or genres they feature, but also in their formality. For example, some storytelling events feature a curated show with a predetermined set of tellers. Others invite tellers to volunteer to tell a story; audience members interested in telling a story are invited to put their names in a hat (tellers are randomly selected) or on a list (tellers tell in the order in which their name appears on the list) and tellers are selected from those who volunteered. In addition, storytelling events vary in the type of venue in which they are held, such as theatres, historical sites, parks, libraries, and pubs. Although different venues, such as libraries and pubs, may attract different audience populations[2], these storytelling opportunities can provide a forum where members of the community, whose voices may not often be heard, can share their artistry, culture, traditions, and perspectives. Prior to the 2020 societal changes due to the Coronavirus pandemic (e.g., the need for social distancing, the closing of public gathering places, etc.), live storytelling events in the United States seemed to be increasingly popular[3] and increasingly diverse.

3 Storytelling in the Pandemic

Although many storytellers enjoy storytelling as a hobby or avocation, others use storytelling as an integral part of their professional work as teachers, librarians, museum educators, and clergy. Still others are professional storytellers, who earn their living performing stories and leading storytelling workshops. Although itinerant professional tellers are frequently featured performers at storytelling festivals and conferences, they also perform in educational contexts such as schools, libraries, museums, and historical sites.

In 2020, when schools, libraries, museums, theatres, and other performance venues began to close to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, storytellers who had contracts for advanced bookings suddenly found all of their bookings canceled for the foreseeable future. These sudden cancellations not only eradicated the ability of storytellers to engage in their artistry and provide educational storytelling performances and workshops, for many tellers the loss of work meant the loss of their primary or sole source of income.

Storytelling listservs, such as those sponsored by Northeast Storytelling (Northeast Storytelling, n.d.) and the National Storytelling Network (National Storytelling Network, n.d.), became flooded with storytellers

seeking and giving advice on how to sustain their artistry and livelihood in a virtual environment. Storytellers proficient in using video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, or platforms with online streaming capabilities, such as Facebook, YouTube, or Streamyard, offered advice or workshops to educate the storytelling community. Others offered suggestions on ways to record and disseminate storytelling videos using online platforms and websites.

Though this move online was fraught with trials and tribulations, it also had substantial, if unanticipated, benefits. Prior to the global pandemic, most storytelling events and festivals primarily attracted local or regional participants. When these events and festivals were forced to move online, however, they became more widely accessible to larger and more international audiences. Some storytelling organizations, such as the World Storytelling Institute (n.d.) and a collaboration of international storytelling organizations (Replay Storytelling, 2020), produced 24-hour storytelling festivals that attracted tellers and audiences from around the globe. This allowed audiences to take advantage of the programing that best fit their schedules and time zones. In addition, some storytelling shows and festivals were recorded, so those who were not able to take advantage of the "live" online performances synchronously, could view them asynchronously at a time that best suited their needs. In this way, the growth and development of online or "virtual" storytelling performances and workshops introduced tellers, educators, and audiences to storytelling techniques and strategies from a diverse multicultural, multiethnic group of tellers from a wide variety of storytelling traditions around the world. It also gave tellers the opportunity to share their work more broadly and to hone their online storytelling skills.

When Coronavirus mitigation efforts required schools to close, and parents found themselves trying to educate their children at home, many storytellers, who had worked with children in schools, libraries, museums, and other educational settings, began to offer online storytelling performances and workshops for children and adolescents. Prior to the pandemic, The Moth (n.d.-a) produced a variety of live storytelling shows, offered Moth Teacher Institutes and other teacher professional development opportunities (The Moth, n.d.-d), and taught storytelling workshops for New York High School Students (The Moth, n.d.-c). During the pandemic, The Moth not only moved their storytelling shows to a virtual platform, but also began posting weekly lessons for students who had unexpectedly found themselves quarantined in their homes (The Moth, March 24, 2020).

4 Educational Storytelling from Face-to-Face to Virtual Learning Environments

The successful transition from live to virtual storytelling performances and workshops highlights the flexibility of storytelling to provide educational content through a variety of modes and contexts. Moreover, the online modality makes storytelling training readily available to teachers and educators around the globe. Educators with access to the Internet can participate in storytelling professional development opportunities on a variety of days at a variety of times without leaving their homes, let alone traveling to a festival or conference. Educators who take advantage of these virtual professional development opportunities will not only enhance their own pedagogy and praxis, but will also support storytellers and storytelling organizations struggling to promote excellence, artistry, and educational effectiveness while remaining financially viable in the midst of a pandemic.

As educators strive to engage students in face-to-face and virtual classroom instruction (sometimes simultaneously), a repertoire of storytelling techniques, prompts, and strategies can help those educators design dynamic classroom activities that promote student learning in a range of content areas. The myriad of both synchronous and asynchronous international storytelling performances and online workshops provide educators interested in honing their storytelling skills opportunities to learn from master tellers from around the world. In addition, storytelling podcasts (e.g., Dicks & Dicks, n.d.; The Moth, n.d.-b), books (e.g., Burns, 2013, 2017; Collins & Cooper, 2005; Dicks, 2018; Hamilton & Weis, 1990; Leitman, 2015; MacDonald, 1993; Mooney & Holt, 1996), and other resources (e.g., 6-Word Memoirs, 2005-2017; Pixar Animation Studios & Khan Academy, 2020; The Moth, n.d.-d, n.d.-e) can guide novice and experienced educators as they endeavor to develop and hone their storytelling skills and artistry.

Although many consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic are unpleasant, restrictive, and tragic, the successful transition of storytelling performances and storytelling workshops from predominantly live events to predominantly virtual events may provide a glimmer of hope to educators struggling to develop engaging content in both face-to-face and virtual classrooms. Learning new pedagogical strategies and techniques may seem daunting at a time when educators are coping with the pandemic and all of the concomitant changes it has brought to the field of education. Yet, storytelling skills educators acquire during the pandemic will not only help

them to accommodate learners' needs across the ever-changing landscape of education and the increasing multiplicity of educational modalities, but will prove valuable even when students and educators return to more traditional classroom environments. As educators develop the art and craft of storytelling, they will not only develop their voices and artistry as storytellers, but they will learn to nurture and encourage the voices and artistry of those they teach.

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[1] According to Sobol (2007) and Radner (2008), the modern storytelling movement in the United States began in the 1970s.

[2] Some storytelling events are designed for specific populations (e.g., adults, children, families, etc.), which may affect the venue chosen to house the event.

[3] It is worth noting that in 2001 Love, Benefiel, and Harer (2001) noted "storytellers and storytelling are on the upswing" (p. 242).