

I. African Storytelling Tradition

A. Role of the Griot (GREE-oh)

In the past, there were certain people in West African villages who had the title of Griot. Usually an elderly man, the Griot knew stories, lessons, and history that had been passed down for centuries from generation to generation. The Griot's purpose was to: a) know and teach family lineage within the village; b) relate cultural beliefs, customs, and stories with morals to the elders and other tribesmen; and c) provide the evening's entertainment with educational stories. Frequently, the morals of these educational stories were related to contemporary social issues. The Griot was not paid for his services, but instead was provided with food and shelter by the village.

The Griot of today is different. Although the stories of West Africa are still vibrant as they were in the past, the Griot's position within West African cultures has changed. Today, Griots may be much younger and are sometimes paid for their services. Also, the historical significance of the stories is not as important as it was in the past. Of course, some cultures may still exist where the Griot's role is similar to that of the past.

B. Social Changes

In the past, storytelling occasions were not only fun, but also provided an opportunity for the villagers to learn cultural traditions and congregate to discuss village matters. These social gatherings created opportunities to bring the entire village together as a harmonious group.

C. Changes

West African folktales have changed little as they have been handed down from generation to generation. When telling the story, part of the Griot's job was to relate the moral of the story to a contemporary social issue. The Griot could show a connection between a story that had been told for centuries and the daily life of his audience. The traditional storyteller keeps his/her audience and social issues in mind whenever he/she selects and explains stories. This was, and should be, still the main purpose when telling African stories. To not do so would be a misuse of cultural tradition and art form!

*** Story: "Wondrous Powers: Mirror, Sandals, and a Medicine Bag"**
(Grade 4 - Adult)

REFLECTIONS:

II. Storytelling Skills

The Storyteller's closet is filled with "tricks of the trade" to convey the true meanings of words. These "tricks of the trade" include body movements and voice inflection. Each storyteller has his/her own "trick" and for each story must decide which tricks to use and which to save for another story. By practicing the following exercises, the teller can begin in the process of developing these "tricks" to provide added enjoyment and meaning to any story.

A. Body Movements

Body movement is just as important (if not more so) than the voice. The story can be brought to life by using the body to accentuate certain words. The voice and body movements working together provide effective storytelling. However, when the movements are contrary to the words being spoken, the listener will be confused. It is important to practice having words and voice motivate movement.

1. Eyes

The eyes can be crucial to providing the true meaning of the words spoken. They convey the dramatic impact that the teller wants to get across to the listeners.

Practice conveying different emotions with only your eyes, such as anger, surprise, mysteriousness, anticipation, sarcasm, disgust, fright, and sincerity, either in front of a mirror or with a friend.

2. Hands

Your hands also mirror the emotions of the story. If hands are used too much and in an unnatural way, they detract from the story. Therefore, it is important to be conscious of the power of hand movements.

To practice hand movements, read a story by placing the book at eye level (for example on a music stand) and let the words dictate what your hands will do. Try to gesture as normally as possible.

There are two things you should be aware of. First, try not to overuse your hand movements. There are certain sentences or parts of a story that your voice, eyes, or walk should convey and not your hands. Secondly, make sure your gestures are appropriate for the gender of the character. For example, a male character should have masculine gestures. This helps the audience distinguish characters from each other.

3. Feet

If you are standing, it is best to begin and end in the same spot. There may be certain places you stand for each character and/or similar occurrences in the story. If you sit, try to add movements, such as shifting your body weight, crossing your legs, leaning, etc. whenever you feel the story suggest a movement.

Practice by watching other sit, walk, move, etc., and then mimicking their movements.

Final Note: These "tricks" will prove invaluable to the listener as well as you, the teller. The best storytellers are acknowledged for how well they help the audience understand the meaning of the story using both words and nonverbal cues. When the audience does not have to rely on the written word but, instead, gets much of the meaning from the storyteller's nonverbal cues, the storyteller has truly done their job. That is why storytelling is much more powerful than story reading!

B. Use of Voice

The voice can convey many different emotions - anger, happiness, sincerity, anxiousness, thoughtfulness, assuredness, etc. By expressing different emotions through the voice, the storyteller can immediately convey the mood and tone of that portion of the story.

To practice expressing different emotions through the voice, face someone (preferably a non-family member) and practice the following sentences displaying the emotion indicated.

"If the baboon would laugh just one more time, he'd disappear!"
(anticipation)

"Sometimes you just can't understand the meaning. But, try. That's all you can do....try!" (anger)

"Every day it would happen. The same way. The same time. It was like the sun....predictable." (bored)

"And from that day 'til this very minute, man has been fascinated with the unknown! (mysterious)

Now practice saying the same sentences using the following emotions: anger, surprise, sincerity, anticipation, sarcasm, disgust, fright, delight.

- * **Story: "The Lion and the Rabbit"** (Pre-K - Grade 3)
(based on "Anansi's Riding Horse," A Jamaican Folktale)

What storytelling "tricks" did you observe in the telling?

REFLECTIONS:

III. Involving Students in the Story

- A. Active listening
- B. Call and response
 - * verbal - words or noises
 - * nonverbal - movements
- C. Students Portraying Roles in Story
 - * teacher as narrator
 - * student(S) as narrator
 - * students as storytellers
 - * student as solo storyteller

- * **Story: "Talk"** (Grades 1 - 4)

How did the storyteller involve the audience in the story?

IV. Deciding Student Involvement in Stories

Some African stories may not be appropriate for your students. Stories may be too advanced, childish, shallow, or not entertaining enough to hold the intended audience's attention. Therefore, it is most appropriate to evaluate the story to determine if it is appropriate for your intended listeners.

- A. Students in K - Grade 2
 - Students of these ages respond best to interactive stories that include a repetitive pattern, opportunities for audience response, and an obvious lesson. Also, stories that include humorous body movements and facial expressions tend to be popular.

Recommendations:

1. Active Listening - ask students questions after a major occurrence (or turning point) in the story.
2. Call and Response - Very effective with younger students. for example, have students respond with animal sounds or movements an animal or key phrase about an animal. Have students make up body movements for story characters.

B. Students in Grade 3 - 6

Stories for older elementary students may include more character development. The African story's traditional focus on respect, positive attitude toward oneself and community, and the importance of the spoken word as communication all; make stories perfect for these students.

Recommendations:

1. Active listening - ask students questions after a major occurrence (or turning point) in the story.
2. Call and response (same as for younger students) For example, have students imitate animal sounds when the animal is mentioned. Or have students respond with a certain phrase or line when the storyteller says a key phrase. Have students make up body movement for story characters.
3. Students portraying roles in stories - For example, have students portray a certain character by performing an action or saying a phrase/line.
4. Writing exercise - have students rewrite the story changing major occurrences which effect the story's outcome. Does this effect the lesson of the story? If so, how?

V. Learning Lessons from the Story

Read the story aloud. Do you like the story? Do you understand the lesson of the story? How long did it take to read the story? Would this story be too long to tell? (The story should not take longer than 5 minutes.) Read the story again.

A. Identify what you consider to be the main lesson in the story.

*** Story: "Quico Son" (Grade 3 - 12)**

B. Discussing the Story

- * What "recall" questions did the storyteller ask? Why did he ask those particular questions?
- * What connection did the storyteller draw to contemporary issues?
- *What was the lesson of the story?

VI. Putting It All Together: Telling African Tales

A. Small Group Activity

1. Divide into small groups by grade levels. each group will be given a story appropriate for the grade level they teach.
2. Decide how your group will tell the story incorporating storytelling skills, involving the audience in the story, and asking questions to identify the lesson of the story.

B. Present Stories to Large Group

VII. Summary

REFLECTIONS:

VIII. Selected Bibliography

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