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Terry Blackhawk

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THE GIFTS OF STORY: USING THE ORAL TRADITION IN THE CLASSROOM

Terry Blackhawk

One way to move students beyond the literal and figurative bindings of written text is to restore to the classroom the power and pleasures of the oral tradition. In "The Spark that Initiates Learning: Oral Language in the Classroom," Doherty provides us with useful insights into the notion of the oral classroom—that is, a classroom which encourages and respects students' oral culture and uses that culture as a bridge toward literacy. Doherty reminds us that students' primary language is oral, not written. Their medium (and thus their message) is the spoken word. A storytelling approach, which makes use of students' own oral culture as well as the oral tradition that has come down to us over the centuries, can help foster an encouraging, respectful environment in the classroom which enhances language learning of all kinds.

I like to draw a connection between my exposure to the recent revival in storytelling and my growth as both a writer and a writing teacher. Some years ago, I became aware of the nationwide resurgence of storytelling. I attended workshops with local tellers, journeyed to Jonesboro, Tennessee for the annual festival sponsored by NAPPS (National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling), and found, time and again, the enchantment of story. In these settings I felt like a child again; and, although I was not aware of it at the time, I think now that those experiences helped to "recharge" my imagination, which had gone dormant through years of diagnostic/prescriptive teaching. Tentatively, I began to tell a few stories in my own classroom. Then, after a transfer from junior high to high school and an assignment to teach basic writing classes, I discovered how story could serve to nourish writing for both me and my students.

The embrace of story and the oral tradition has enriched my teaching in a number of ways. In a literature class it provides opportunities for the students' own life experiences to connect with the literature we study. Students learn that writers do not lead lives that are intrinsically richer or more interesting than anyone else's. Rather, writers bring powers of observation and the ability to create enhanced meaning from the stuff of ordinary life. By helping students realize this, a storytelling approach encourages them to create their own stories in response to literature and to deal with significant and universal themes in a personal way.

In a writing class, students' own stories can help turn the classroom into a celebration of who we are. But beyond the obvious motivations of communication and acceptance, working from personal stories has other beneficial effects on students' writing. Family stories enable students to utilize topics for writing that have been rehearsed and that already have a story structure. Such subjects help us sidestep the notorious "bed-to-bed" pieces, because the story has been told (i.e. structured) at least once already. I usually ask students to recount stories they have already told to others or ones they have heard their parents or grandparents tell about them. "Tell about the time when..." is a good direction, as those final three words often signal a story that can be told well.

Sharing stories orally with the whole class or in small groups also helps students develop a sense of audience. When students bounce ideas off one another prior to writing them, not only is their thinking sharpened but also their sense of the audience's perspective. Also, when we respond to one another's oral stories, we may appreciate humor as well as question unclear moments. "Developing writers," as Doherty says, "are often not sensitive to the reader's examples. In an oral classroom, the class becomes the audience and requests concrete details when necessary" (41). This give and take is especially helpful to students with weak writing skills, many of whom are quite skillful as *tellers* of tales. An expression of interest by their peers about the events of their lives helps motivate such students to move from the spoken to the written word.

Using personal stories as sources for writing can also lead to personal growth as students deal with issues that extend beyond the classroom. It can mean learning new things about one's own heritage or developing new insights into family situations. From an assignment to investigate her

family's experiences during the Civil Rights Movement, Lana, for example, discovered that her father had organized a union and won an anti-discrimination class-action suit on behalf of his co-workers in the early sixties. Tonya wrote of her uncle's experiences in Vietnam, which seemed to help her better understand her feelings about his personality and the problems he was facing.

Storytelling also builds bonds between teacher and students and helps us become what Macrorie calls "vulnerable teachers." By this I take Macrorie to mean that we must approach students not as authoritarian embodiments of the Right Answer, but rather as meaning-seekers who are ourselves part of the community of learning we attempt to shape with our students. My sharing of my own stories with students is part of this vulnerability. I want them to know me as a person and a writer. I want them to see me groping for topics and starting from nothing but my own life story—just as I ask them to do. Thus I model inventing in front of the class. I jot down several memories as possible topics and ask them to decide which topics seem most interesting. I try to keep my mind clear so that the topics are as spontaneous as possible. Then I ask the students to select a single topic they want me to pursue, after which I practice the techniques of exploration I want them to follow: brainstorming, clustering, free-associating, etc. I discuss the thoughts that are occuring to me as I write down my words. Interestingly, I often discover new insights for myself as I write at the board or overhead projector. This often feels risky, but the vulnerability is exhilarating. It also establishes trust. If I am willing to share personal discoveries and feelings, it gives students permission to do the same.

Modeling or giving examples means that I share not only my experiences but also the stories of my students. It's a sort of teacher-as-griot role, imitating the oral historians of African tradition. Each year I add to my repertoire of stories by students I have taught over the years. Students enjoy hearing the stories of others, which in turn gives them ideas for stories of their own to write or tell. I love to share, for example, the story of how James' parents met one another. His mother and grandfather—a great baseball fan—were in the bleachers at a minor league game one day when the right fielder made a diving catch that landed him in James' mother's lap. The two had never met, but destiny and love ran true. She married the outfielder, and hence we had James to tell the tale, although we do speculate on the course of James' history if the batter had, say, struck out.

Many writers, of course, draw from the oral tradition in their work, and I have had the good fortune to bring several writers to work with my classes on a regular basis. Playwright and novelist Bill Harris has led discussions with students about the dynamics of shaping a story. He has helped students consider what to highlight in a story, as well as where to begin and where to end, who are the significant actors and who are peripheral, which is the best voice in which to tell a story, and so on. All of these choices, he has pointed out to my students, are choices made by storytellers. Mr. Harris often connects his discussions to the oral tradition. He has shared stories from his childhood. Sometimes he has had us focus on just one or two questions, such as: How did your family come to be where they are? or What stories do your grandparents tell about your parents when they were little? Such questions can open up a world of story.

Another Detroit writer who has been to our classroom is Naomi Long Madgett, whose work also connects with family history . Her latest volume of poetry, *Octavia and Other Poems*, has recently been adopted as a supplemental text by the Detroit Public Schools. The poet used letters, documents, interviews, and family stories to recreate the life of her aunt, Octavia, who died several years before she was born. These beautiful poems represent an ongoing research into family history and recreate an era as well as the life of an individual. After we read and discussed these poems, I invited Ms. Madgett to visit my classes to share her writing with students. Not only did connecting the written word with the living author add a magical dimension to the students' experience of the text, but the presence of both Mrs. Madgett and Mr. Harris also encouraged students to discover the stories of their families.

Ancient stories are another source for inspiration within a classroom that partakes of the power of the oral tradition.

> Under the earth I go
> On the oak leaf I stand
> I ride on the filly
> That never was foaled
> And I carry the dead in my hand. (20)

This beautiful Celtic story opening, collected by Livo and Rietz, captures for me another potent gift of the oral tradition: the world of imagination. For story does not only mean the personal stories we use to construct our individual and family histories. It is also the ancient repository of human

imagination from throughout the world. It gives us entry into a world which both "is" and "is not." It is magic and metaphor, and, as in these eerie lines, the embodiment of paradox. No matter what our age, we can still be touched and transformed by story.

As Bettelheim has established, ancient stories can impart deep psychological meaning. By inviting professional storytellers as guests, by using their audio and videotapes, or by telling stories I have learned myself, I bring this ancient tradition into my classroom. I also encourage students to read from various folklore collections, and I collect and share poems that are based on myths and legends. Writers have for centuries been influenced by ancient myths and legends, and contemporary poets are no different. Women writers, in particular, have appropriated old myths as an act of redefinition or to sound feminist themes. Margaret Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems," Katha Pollitt's "Penelope Writes," or Lucille Clifton's "this belief"—which uses motifs from "Jack and the Beanstalk" in a strong anti-racist statement—are just a few examples of modern uses of ancient tales. Ancient stories, with their extraordinary imagery and themes of abandonment, rebirth, journeys, and transformations, provide rich source material from which students may express feelings and moods. Storytellers often say that they don't select stories, but stories select them. I learned to tell "The Seal Skin," an Icelandic tale retold by Lynn Rubright, after such a "finding." It tells of a man who steals a seal-maiden's skin and thus prevents her from leaving her human form and resuming her seal's identity. He marries her and she bears him seven children and is a good wife to him until she one day comes upon the key that opens the forbidden box in which her sealskin is hidden. Despite great inner conflict, she puts the skin on and returns again to her watery world. The themes of this story (identity, betrayal, choice, the magic of metamorphosis) as well as the setting (Midsummernight's Eve, an island, Scandinavia, a hut, a cave) all struck chords for me, and I felt compelled to learn the story.

Much creative thinking can take place in students when they hear a story such as "The Seal Skin." The following poem was written by a student, with whom I had no prior interaction, immediately after she heard me tell the story at the Olivet Summer Institute for Arts and Sciences.

To Huldar

Sand works its way between my toes
and my heels sink as a wave blankets my feet.

The water is cold and the salt stings my legs.

Can you remember the way hot dirt sifted
under your feet and in your sandals?

Or the way wheat grains feel when you clutch at them
but they escape through the holes
your fingers make?

I do not understand why you chose
the smooth blanket of the sea
over the feel of fleece against your skin
as we lay covered by the night—

Why you chose the underwater over me.

Lana Ackroyd

It is evident from Lana's poem that the apprehending of a story is an active event that goes far beyond mere "exposure.' It is a creative process, an *act* of imagination. While I have little storytelling training, I have found that when I tell a story, I somehow enter the world of that story. I tell it from within my imagination. And when students listen, they do the same thing: they create the world of the story for themselves. We may all hear the same words when Sarah McCoy tells about the African girl going into the river for her necklace. But each one of us creates our own river. For some it flows north or south, for others east or west. You may see it overhung with thick growth. My river may have a dry wide bank or a steep muddy one. Because a story is so rich, students will find different scenes, characters, or images that resonate for them.

Often we want to do nothing with a story in the classroom except savor it. But if writing is our goal (as it often is), story can enhance students' writing experiences in several ways. It can, for example, provide us with a common source for playing with voice or point of view. Suggesting that students write to, about, or in the voice of one of the characters is usually enough to get them started in this vein, but specific exercises can also help stimulate their imaginations. Storyteller Mary Hamilton suggests telling a story as if it were the hottest gossip you ever heard. Rewriting a story from the point of view of a minor character or an inanimate object in the story can also be a lot of fun. Katherine Machan Aal's poem "Cinderella's Mice" probes the situation of those small creatures suddenly swept up in something much larger and grander than themselves, something that felt like destiny but let them down

in the end.

The imaginative experience of story can be sensory, spatial, or kinesthetic, and can help add these dimensions to students' writing. I may ask students to select one scene from a story and describe it simply by starting with "I can see...." If I tell the Chinese tale "The Stonecutter," for example, the group may describe the stonecutter watching the approach of the emperor's parade. What is on the horizon? In the following example, Sophia draws on her experience of the story to create a descriptive scene.

> As the stonecutter chops at his latest task, he sees a little yellow bee dancing from flower to flower in the multicolored joyousness of its life. The bee moves with a trance-like rhythm, wings fluttering, and the stonecutter smiles a lopsided grin. He continues his work, chopping with long, hard strokes, when out of the corner of his eye he sees children running happily to greet the supreme leader of the land. He drops his equipment and runs toward the sun, stops to wipe the sweat coming down from his brow, then continues on, his destiny in sight. Making it to the road just seconds before the emperor passes, he bows down in complete satisfaction.
>
> Sophia Richardson

After students write and share their visions,I point out the various ways they have used sensory information. I try to move from their specific writings to note general techniques they are often not aware of using: one student may be especially sensitive to sound, another to color, a third to texture. In general it is more helpful to discover and highlight examples of these approaches from within the student's actual writing, rather than to begin from an externally imposed directive such as "be sure to use three examples from the five senses." A story provides us with a common imaginative experience from which to conduct discussions such as these. And sharing their writings in class leads students to appreciate the wide range of details their imaginations can produce.

Ancient myths and stories provide excellent source material for writing. They provide students with imagery, objects, and situations which enable them to perform literary transformations on the material of their own lives. LaTrese, for example, weaves an allusion to Narcissus with the intensely felt imagery of her poem.

Dreams in the Wind

Like Echo
Your loveless life is worthless

Without purpose or being,
With wasted dreams

On a fool like Narcissus
Whose only love was himself.

So when he left you,
Disappearing in a cloud of mist,

Your heart rose up
Like a glowing comet

That came dashing to earth
Smashed and broken

Leaving you
With only his memory

And name to whisper
Through the trees,

And broken fragments
To console your heart.

LaTrese Tillman

But why insist on using these stories as *oral* activities? Why should we *tell* stories or encourage students to tell personal tales? Do we waste precious instructional time merely telling tales when the richness of stories could be transmitted as easily on the printed page? Livo and Rietz explain the value of maintaining and respecting an *oral* tradition as follows:

> Storytelling is a literary activity, an art form in its own right, and the vehicle for the practice and preservation of a literature. It is an ancient and precious legacy. Its apparent ephemerality, that it must be preserved through. . .oral language, is its great strength and accounts for its general accessibility to people of all ages and across cultures. (19)

It is the magic of the listening experience that, I believe, so totally engages the students' imagination in a storytelling event. There is a kind of peace that settles over the classroom during a story and a sense of sharing and community. Telling and hearing one another's personal stories add another

dimension to that community. Both "strands" of story—the imaginative and the personal—present powerful sources for writing and for helping us to learn better who we are.

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Terry Blackhawk teaches English at Mumford High School in Detroit, Michigan.