

FEATURE



THE BABY AND THE BATHWATER

A TALE OF STANDARDS AND
STORYTELLING

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This is a story about the baby and the bathwater. In other words, it is a tale about storytelling in a time of standards. It begins with a story and ends with an important lesson on how educators must hold on to the pleasure, joy, and love of stories—the affective components of teaching and learning—when navigating the educational environment of national standards and standardized testing.

In the lyrics to one of his hit songs, popular country music star Trace Adkins was asked why he sings country music songs with “twang” about “trains and hillbilly things.” The singer responded simply, “cause they’re all just songs about me” (Smith and Hill 2004).

Many of us see our lives in the songs, poetry, and stories of others. Through songs and stories we find words to put to the feelings we have and connect with feelings that inspire our words. While we find ourselves in the stories others tell, nothing is as satisfying and fulfilling as telling our own stories. Trace Adkins is trying to tell us that, as he glorifies the pleasure of singing songs, he is telling us the story of his life, his dreams, and his experiences.

Some of the best stories we tell are in the form of a song. These three- to four-minute tales put to music can weave complete stories. They may recall spectacular events; ponderings on life, love, history, or patriotism; or feature more-common elements like tractors, cowboy hats, big trucks, mamas, and friends lost along the way. Regardless of the tale or theme, song or story, the point is that songs are creative expressions of our shared experience. In each case, some writer/storyteller in some moment of inspiration scribbled or keyed some words, fitted them together

into a form that no one else had ever quite formed before, and felt the contentment that comes from setting a story free to become what it will with those who hear or read it. Sometimes these writers/storytellers are poets, and sometimes they are singers. Sometimes, if we are very lucky, we find them in classrooms paving the way for future writers, storytellers, and poets to bring their imagination and experiences to life.

Storytelling is a craft that takes “talking” to the level of “telling.” The cleverest of teachers know these tricks. The shift from talker to teller is the one that makes the difference with the students we find the most difficult to reach. The best educators have a particular knack for storytelling—taking the dry facts of history lifted from textbooks, dusting off the dates, times, places, and names, and injecting life into these captured moments that shape our world, our country, and our lives. These gifted educators are the ones who bring to life people and places long dead and can share the magic of the story. Educators who value and use storytelling in the classroom, in the library, and in special school events aimed specifically at highlighting the history and the people of a community have the potential to make the most positive lasting effect on student literacy and to cultivate a love for literature.

Children who have never heard a parent or a grandparent spin a tale, who have never lost themselves in a yarn, and who have never thought about the precious jewels of stories that lie inside each of them do not know the magic of story. Many of our school children have not experienced this magic. Consequently, when hearing tales for the first time, these students have to be drawn in slowly, lured into almost absent-mindedly

following a trail of breadcrumb story-kernels until these listeners are lost in the forest of a spectacular word journey into the past, the future, the heart of an earthworm, or floating on one of the world’s last remaining icebergs.

Textbooks won’t take children to the places a well-told story does. Workbooks won’t take them there, and neither will computers. Books and multimedia are wonderful components of the big picture of getting students to these imaginative places—but the only path that leads to loving language and the gift of story is the same oral tradition that

has sustained life on this planet since the beginning: storytelling.

As is often the case in education, we are at the mercy of the pendulum that swings wildly—bringing in new methods and materials, and, many times, rapidly abandoning the old. Many educators find it challenging enough to ensure their students all meet the standards without adding to the list of mandates. However, if we fail to deliberately target the love of reading and do not model the love of reading and story, then how can we find it surprising that, although students can read, they simply choose not to?



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Although it is true that we do not see specific academic outcomes related to cultivating a love of stories and storytelling in our national standards, the two are not diametrically opposed. In fact, stories are likely the most powerful tool we have to make the multitude of clinically written, jargon-infused, drained-of-meaning, “the-students-will” standards palatable to the human brain—something our students can actually learn, remember, and value. Standards that guide our language arts and reading instruction are what we

must follow, but the Common Core State Standards have no codicil that states, “Please, abandon all reason and things you know that work.” In essence, let’s not be the educators that throw the baby (storytelling) out with the bathwater (previous standards). Instead, let’s be the ones who champion the value of story as a major component of how the human brain learns.

Opportunities abound for harnessing the power of storytelling. Every discipline taught in our schools provides fodder for story. The famous—and not so famous—people, events, places, and inventions are wrapped in story. The emotional and sensory factors of a story are more powerful ways of learning than simply reciting a set of facts. Mining biographies and autobiographies reveals some

powerful and interesting facts that can jumpstart a story or introduction to a topic of study.

For example, did you know that left-handed Leonardo da Vinci wrote notes for himself from right to left and that other readers needed a mirror to decipher his writing? Were you aware that Alexander Graham Bell received his middle name as a birthday present from his father on Alexander’s eleventh birthday? A common misconception is that George Washington had teeth made from wood. Not true. His teeth were made from hippopotamus ivory and teeth from donkeys and horses. He also suffered from taphophobia, the fear of being buried alive. All these historical tidbits reveal real, complex human beings whose lives had many dimensions aside from their famous

THE VALUE OF STORY AS A MAJOR HUMAN BRAIN LEARNS.

discoveries and contributions to science, art, and politics. It is the stories that surround these famous people, not just the shortcut facts of what they did, that people gravitate to, savor, and remember. Our social studies/history, science, math, art, music, language, and sports classes provide daily opportunities to capture imaginations, appeal to the “ancient” brains of learners, and spark interest in knowing more about our world through story.

It is my belief that the reason many teachers and administrators (and people in Washington, DC, who have committees to look into just these sorts of things) snub their noses at the value of storytelling as an integral part of content-area instruction in the classroom is that storytelling doesn't cost anything; it isn't glitzy; you can't buy it prepack-

aged in a box, and it didn't make the short list for being “research-based.” It is just the most ancient, lasting, proven (Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Moses, Mohamed) device for reaching people and impacting lives since humans developed language, sat by their fires, and tried to make sense of the world.

As a veteran teacher and storyteller, my advice to educators is simply this: Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Stories and storytelling are integral to teaching and learning across the curriculum. Finally, in this time of performance measures, high-stakes testing, accountability, tracking, benchmarks, and—sometimes—bats-in-our-belfries, let's take a moment to try something that has moved people since the dawn of time. Let's tell some stories.



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Center for Literacy. She has been a storyteller for the last twenty years. Her stories feature the life and times of a little girl growing up in rural Tennessee in the 1950s and 1960s. Pam's stories pay tribute to a loving family, including her treasured grandmother and grandfather. Her encounters on the family farm will make you laugh, and stories of the family members who shaped her life will make you cry.

Work Cited:

Smith, Shaye, and Ed Hill. 2004. “Songs about Me.” Milwaukee: Hal Leonard.

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