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## ORAL CONNECTIONS TO LITERACY: THE NARRATIVE

*ABSTRACT: Today's English language teachers face broad cultural and racial differences between themselves and their students which negate old assumptions about teaching and learning. Teaching is about choices, making them and giving them. This essay discusses the narrative as a means for establishing an environment where students ultimately will have choices. Narrative in the context of learning language in general and writing in particular opens the students to shared contexts and culture. A pedagogy based on storytelling encourages the students to understand and appreciate their classmates' cultural and racial diversity while helping them become active participants in the broader conversation of the literate community. In this way students develop practical skills in utilizing a variety of rhetorical styles and acquire intercultural understanding and appreciation. The three- to four-week exercise discussed here enables the teacher to achieve educational goals of interaction with the oral and written text, while achieving a sense of community in the classroom.*

Today, more than ever, America's mainstream college classrooms are multicultural, multilingual, and multiracial, comprised of students from widely divergent cultural and ethnic backgrounds. One of the primary challenges to educators is to understand both the breadth of this diversity and how the new

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immigrant groups differ from many early 20th century traditional immigrant groups from which the educators' own families sprang. This acknowledgement would allow faculty to comprehend the broad cultural and racial differences between themselves and their students, thus negating assumptions about teaching and learning styles formerly so popular.

Much of what we learned as teachers has been based on implicit understanding of the cultures that nurtured us. These implicit, intrinsic notions are not the same as those with which our students operate. If we are to realize our commitment to educate all students, then we need to make those implicit, intrinsic notions and values explicit to those to whom we are committed while at the same time broadening our own knowledge. A. Bartlett Giamatti, former president of Yale University, said that teaching is about choices. The teacher chooses how to structure choice. He says, "Teaching is an instinctual art, mindful of potential, craving of realizations . . . engages every part in order to keep the choices open and the shape alive for the student, so that the student may enter in, and begin to do what the teacher has done; make choices . . . (1988)."

One contribution of the English teacher is to provide the student with certain attributes that allow choices to be made. According to Elaine Maimon, Dean of Experimental Programs at Queens College, CUNY, and well-known advocate of writing across the curriculum, these attributes are: the ability to talk to strangers and convey an idea; the ability to write; the ability to read and listen in active critical ways; the ability to read numbers and use symbol systems; and finally the ability to know that shared narration or shared knowledge of a community which concerns the evolving tales or stories of the community (1989). This final attribute, the ability to know the community story, is important in teaching our new students. They have to acquire a sense of the community or society which will open doors to the intrinsic values of that society. In this way the English teacher serves as a window on the world.

Language use always occurs in some context and is always context-sensitive (Schiffrin 1987). When the teacher uses familiar or personal contexts, it allows for a greater range in developing new contexts. Using the folk tale, for example, provides an occasion where speakers and listeners may incorporate contexts of shared meanings and world views. The contexts may be social through which definitions of self and situation are construed. Or the contexts may be cognitive in the sense that they

deal with contexts of past experience and knowledge. To speakers and listeners as well, meaning conveyed by a text is meaning which is to be interpreted by them invariably based on their inferences about the cultural, social, or linguistic cognitive propositional connections underlying what is said.

This cognitive propositional connection leads us to understand that it is a tendency of humans to see things chiefly in terms of their own existing categories and to classify data in their own terms. The phenomenon, culturally myopic, leads to distortions. To illustrate the distortions commonly made, Toelken (1969) discusses several features of Navaho culture about which many investigators have been naive, a naiveté that has led to misinterpretation. For instance the Navaho view of information and how it may be transmitted differs from that of American mainstream in that sometimes an attitude may be communicated in a statement which is technically false but which uses humor as a vehicle; other examples involve seeming aloofness or unwillingness to be impressed which is communicated by statements designed to make the listener seem stupid or to imply he has missed the point; while another example has to do with information which ritualistically must be specifically requested four times or it will not be given. One who fails to perceive these cultural differences will miss many opportunities to understand the use of language in that society and the society itself. The need to be aware of differences and to make them explicit to our students is important in teaching English which is the purveyor of our culture in America.

Other research supports the belief that orality, for instance, is the fundamental mode of expression in the African American community. Nowhere is it better demonstrated than in the oral narrative style. The storytelling tradition is strong among African Americans and abstract observations about life, love, and people are rendered in the form of concrete narrative sequence which may seem to meander from the point and take on episodic frames. This is a linguistic style which causes problems with American mainstream speakers who want to get to the point and be direct. Nancy Ainsworth-Vaughn (1987) offers the observation that this style is in keeping with the African American verbal system. It is more "topic associative" in the language of Collins and Michaels. It takes on a broader chronological focus than American mainstream narrative style which is more "topic-centered."

The fact is that narrative in the context of learning language

in general and writing in particular can also open the window to shared contexts and culture. Certainly early in my teaching career I began to understand the power of the narrative to coagulate the diverse class. In class after class the story would emerge as a focal point from which all of the students could become involved. I soon began to use the narrative assignment to establish an environment where students ultimately would have choices that could foster their own empowerment and authority. The storytelling encouraged students to understand and appreciate their classmates' cultural and racial diversity and helped them become active participants in the broader conversation of the community through writing. By employing storytelling the English teacher can not only develop a practical comprehension of rhetorical styles, but can enhance intercultural understanding and appreciation as well.

There are three types of storytelling assignments that I have used. The first is the folk tale assignment. A second is ethnographic in nature, where students are asked to tell a story about one of their personal ancestors. The last is a fairly traditional assignment where students tell a personal narrative. Each of these assignments involves, first, an oral telling. To start the students in an exercise in analyzing and interpreting the world through story, I begin with a discussion of the question, "What is a story?" the types of genres, why we tell stories, and what makes a good story. We make a list of the various types of stories excluding very little: tall tales, fables, folk tales, fairy tales, ghost stories, parables, epics, myths, legends, slave narratives, even some personal experiences and lengthy jokes. In the discussion we talk about authorship versus anonymity and the basic category of folklore. We provide names of famous stories, such as Aesop's fables, *Peter and the Wolf*, and the *Prodigal Son*. In the discussion of why we tell stories, inevitably we conclude that storytelling is actually a way of recording history. *His story* and for those of us so inclined *her story*, (which also leads to further discussion).

We share secrets for successful storytelling and compare how stories are told in different parts of the world. In preparation for their own storytelling session I tell them to ask themselves: for whom is the story intended (audience)? what does the audience know about the situation or culture? what vocabulary must be used? what will need special explanation? what background information will be important to create the intended impression? what is the intended impression? and what is it

they want their audience to go away thinking, knowing, or feeling after the story?

If the assignment that semester is the personal or historical narrative, I tell them that having a shaping idea (purpose) will help them decide how to create the impression. I share with them a concept found in Ruth Elcan's *Elements of College Writing* which deals with aspects of an experience. Maureen McDonough-Kolb, a professor at NYU gave it the acronym PIESIP.

- P physical—actions, what you and other people do
- I intellectual—what you think
- E emotional—what you feel
- S social—what you share, how you interact with others
- I imaginative—what you fantasize or imagine
- P perceptual—what you see, hear, smell, taste, touch

When the students are preparing the story, distinguishing PIESIP details help them to review the experience systematically, to emphasize aspects of the story, and to recreate a vivid, descriptive narrative.

Following this discussion, I myself tell a story, either a folk tale, family history, or personal narrative that is especially vivid, humorous, and yet has a very distinct way of looking at some cultural belief. By telling the story, I succeed in providing a model for future storytelling sessions. Along with the story I give an obligatory introduction which gives background on the main characters, their personalities, the region from which the story comes, etc. After I tell the story, we review the important information from the story, and discuss the story's meaning and implications. Following a very lively discussion which can take unpredictable though welcome directions, we discuss how telling the story is similar to writing. We especially want to understand how what we are learning about storytelling can transfer into the writing process, whether we are using narrative style or not.

The folk tale assignment brings familiar folk tales from China, Russia, Haiti, Jamaica, Korea, Colombia, Greece, etc. (those areas from which many of my students come) and permits the students an opportunity to elaborate on the stories, explain the values and beliefs in their society, and enhance self-esteem. Folklore is a primary source of cultural knowledge. Livo and Reitz (1986) define storytelling as “. . . a prehistoric and historic thread of awareness, a way in which we can know, remember and understand.” For the heterogeneous non-native

class, stories from the students' homelands can be the key to promoting cultural appreciation and understanding while cultivating the individual student's feelings of self-worth. A setting where students are encouraged to share stories they know, love, and have heard repeatedly increases their willingness to tell their stories. Not only does telling the story bear fruit in refining oral skills, but the discussion of the story gives all the students opportunity to crystallize their analytical skills in an attempt to define the morals, values, and conditions of the society from which the story sprang. The result is that the students develop an esteem for the customs, culture, and beliefs of not just the target culture of America, but those of other cultures as well. This anthroliterary approach to cross-cultural understanding developed by Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux (1953) promotes understanding not only of others but of oneself as well. It is important for students to know that there are common themes from culture to culture; that the heroes of their country may have counterparts in other countries; that famine, greed, honesty, love, and brotherhood do not exist in their world only. Understanding the fortunes and misfortunes, the dreams and nightmares of other societies leads to a sensitive awareness of the people themselves. Folk tales can illustrate family relations, how food is gathered, the means of communication, and additional facts about daily life (Goodman and Melcher 1984). The themes that emerge represent the values, morals, and strengths of the people. Giving the students the opportunity to share their world view through their folk history and culture permits them to interact on familiar ground while expanding their ability to value others' roles in life and the skills and goals needed for the survival of the group (Shiells, 1986).

This experience is not only a learning one for the students, but should lead to our own increased awareness and appreciation of our students. Many of us have studied the languages of other societies, but there is still a tremendous insight to be gained in learning the culture via the folklore because this is the same way that many people of the native countries themselves learned their heritage, values, and customs (Goodman and Melcher 1984). In a study done by Goodman and Melcher in applied ethnographic monitoring in a bilingual classroom, it was concluded that "personal observation of social behavior and the working of a particular culture in terms as close as possible to the way members view the universe and organize

their behavior led to improved student-teacher relations, changed instructional strategies and teacher expectations, and improved performance.”

The benefits of storytelling in the development of oral skills are apparent. Because English is the one common language of the classroom as well as the target language for many, they have to incorporate careful vocabulary which will convey the central ideas accurately and in sufficient detail. In sharing the folk tale they must remain aware of the audience and its unfamiliarity with the story. The students need to choose a story that they feel is representative of some value they hold dear and communicate it with descriptions that will recreate the mood and intensity of the original story. Here they must both use vivid descriptions and make smooth transitions from one idea to the next. In the end, the story must excite the appropriate emotional response or the effort will have been wasted. The student has to prepare him/herself to answer questions which may be critical to the understanding of the story. As the students begin to share stories and their meanings, a variety of writing themes emerge. There are such themes as survival in the face of adversity, cultural values, politics, customs and religions, to name only a few.

An informal experiment I conducted with freshman composition students where they told folk tales from their ancestral homelands and cultures, followed by discussion, revealed that students not only became more aware of audience, purpose, description, explanation, analysis, illustration, and logic, but in the process they found themselves more tolerant of individual and cultural differences.

As the students become involved in the discussion, they become more aware of how important choosing the best vocabulary can be. They learn the necessity of preparation. They practice explaining concepts before being asked. They begin to initiate generalizations while becoming astute in using vivid description. The familiar and comfortable stories permit the students to lead more naturally into generalizations about people and life which illustrate values, and morals in America and their own homelands. Those discussions require that the students think in terms of defining, explaining, interpreting, and analyzing a wide variety of topics. Thus, the folk tale exercise becomes an excellent tool for prewriting while promoting awareness of cultural similarities and differences.

The second type assignment, the ethnographic narrative, is inspired by reading a story told by Alex Haley called "My Furthest Back Person." The students are asked to talk to elders in their families and to get a story about some person in their family as far back in history as they can go. This ultimately becomes a historical narrative and also fosters interest in history in general. The results are often exciting. Not only is individual family history learned, but frequently the history of various countries. One of my students turned out to be the grandson of a former Olympic Gold Medalist, another the great-granddaughter of an abolitionist. Discovering these pieces of information always leads to interesting discussions. Not everyone knows, for example, that there were free Blacks in New York in the 1600s, nor that slaves fought back. The discussion does not have to be contained since one objective is to sensitize the students to one another's differences while emphasizing commonality. These stories also provide a means by which students can observe recurring themes in every society and at every level.

The third type assignment, the personal life narrative, differs little from the traditional assignment given in the freshman composition class. They tell a story about some experience they have had in their lives and its impact.

The day of the oral telling is a big event. The students in fact develop a sense of camaraderie because they are all literally in the same boat. For many it is the first time they are making a public performance and while others are pros, they are willing to give needed encouragement. As the stories unfold there are always interesting situations which arise.

For example: Diana is a student from Ghana. She is an older woman maybe in her mid-thirties. She told a story about an experience when she was in high school in Ghana. She explained that her father had many sisters who were childless and her father had several wives (1st flag). She went on to say that her father, being the only male in his family, felt obligated to his sisters and therefore gave one of his children to each of his childless sisters (2nd flag). She explained she was living with one of her aunts and attending school. Her father gave her an allowance of \$20 per semester (3rd flag). But when she asked for an additional \$10 per semester he became enraged and felt she was ungrateful and abusive (4th flag). He was so angry that he would not speak or write to her and she not to him. Shortly after, her father died and she never had the opportunity to



make up with him. She learned not to hold grudges and to be forgiving with her loved ones.

Throughout her story there were apparent differences in cultural values that the students, without understanding the differences, interpreted in negative ways. Most of the class at first was irate with the father for his pettiness. It was not until discussion that Diana explained such concepts as the practice of polygamy in Ghana, the relationship of brother and sister and the brother's responsibility to his female relatives, the value of children in a Ghanaian family, the value of dollars twenty years ago and the economy in Ghana at that time, that her classmates were able to assimilate the story. In this telling, Diana began to understand the importance of anticipating audience and providing necessary background information and details in order to convey the impression intended.

Another story told by Yin Yin from Hong Kong illustrated how poorly we understand geography. She tells about a visit she made to a small village in Japan and the curious wall paintings and living arrangements she faced. Her classmates, however, had absolutely no understanding why everything was so curious and why she was unfamiliar with such a thing as wall paintings. After all weren't the same things in her own town? It wasn't until the questions session that they revealed they didn't know Hong Kong was not in Japan and she was not Japanese. From there the story really began to take shape. The discussion took many turns after this discovery, each turn a revealing and informative one for the storyteller and the listeners.

These two examples were stories which revealed customs, geography, and a way of looking at the world all in one lesson and one class. Italians and Greeks learning about Chinese and Africans, Haitians learning about white Americans: all a fascinating multicultural mix. Stories about adoption among Chinese, values in a West Indian home on a small island, goals and aspirations of third generation Germans from Elmhurst, and second generation Puerto Ricans from Spanish Harlem. Furthermore, each provided lessons about anticipating audience, supplying details, and clarifying shaping ideas. These lessons were transferred from the telling into the writing by nonthreatening means.

One time a student told a story/joke about a Catholic priest and a young man who he refused to marry. The priest did agree after being offered a large sum of money. This joke led to a

serious discussion about stereotypes, how they develop, how they may be used to discriminate against others, and even how they may be used in positive resourceful ways. Thus, even a story which started out as a joke can help develop the students' use of analysis. Each discussion seems to have endless possibilities for further exploration. After a series of storytelling sessions, students begin to show more awareness of the rhetorical styles: comparison, illustration, definition, cause and effect, description, explanation, and process.

Following discussions like these a writing assignment can be given that will reflect a great deal of interest and learning. The students can, for example, incorporate their stories into descriptive essays on stereotypes, compare negative and positive effects of a stereotype, or discuss the cause/effect relationship of a stereotype.

As the more interesting themes become apparent to the students, each is asked to keep a record in a journal. They are told to make notes about discussions that were especially exciting to them. We talk about how those themes vary from culture to culture and they keep a personal log of those that may serve as good source material in their future writing.

Discussion following a storytelling event enhances the students' understanding of style, and serves to focus their attention on the importance of audience in the telling. Having face to face reactions to the story, the student is more able to see that information is critical to the conveying of meaning to the audience. The demands of the audience in previous tellings provide guidelines for the writing of the story. The event has the effect of helping the student develop style and audience in pieces of writing as well. A crucial aim is to strengthen the student's ability to relate information in such a way that it will be clear to a variety of listeners or readers.

A personal experience of my own strengthened my conviction that storytelling has many purposes. A few years ago, a woman attempted to pick my pocket. I caught her; there was a confrontation, and I called the police. I told my story a number of times and each time the audience was different. The amount of detail conveyed was different depending on the audience. When I shared my experience with my classes, it became apparent to them how important details were and how the audience influenced how much or how little was shared. I was able to turn an unfortunate experience into a successful lesson because my students, too, were experimenting with the demands of

details and audience. Each assignment features certain consistent elements. The story must be told orally in a group of three or four and recorded on tape. The student may not write out the story, although each assignment requires planning and collection of details. The oral storytelling works as a prewriting device, cultivates critical thinking and analysis, and fosters self-esteem. This as a prewriting stage is creative and nonstressful once the process begins, and it assists me in cultivating a sense of community in the heterogeneous classroom. Following the oral story the students are instructed for homework to transcribe their own story including any interruptions, questions, laughter, or pauses. They are also cautioned **not** to edit. In the next class a discussion ensues about what structural observations were made. Their discoveries lead to a discussion about orality. For example they observe the repetition of words, sounds, and ideas is frequent. They notice the prosodic devices of pause, tone, and pitch changes as well as the verbal fillers such as "um," "uh," "well," "you know," etc. They recognize the incomplete sentences, the stops and the starts, the reliance on coordinating ideas rather than subordinating ones. With my help they also understand that in a face to face telling there is more shared knowledge and interpersonal relationship between the teller and the listener and the immediate feedback is a benefit in that setting. All of these observations are explained as acceptable and expected in oral situations. These are features of orality. Naturally we turn next to a discussion of literacy and what is acceptable, expected, and different from the oral tellings. While there is no adequate theory of how spoken discourse conventions are transferred to situated communicative strategies in written discourse, or how the transition process is affected by differences in communicative backgrounds (Gumperz, et al. 1984), the observations students make in the oral transcription serve as an excellent backdrop for developing some classroom practices. Given that different syntactic, lexical, and discourse features are appropriate to different discourse categories, even if the genre is the same the oral and written forms will follow somewhat different norms (Ainsworth-Vaughn 1987). These are the norms with which I attempt to familiarize the students. Since, both speakers and writers draw resources in communicating from: phonology, syntax, lexical alternatives, discourse phenomena such as repetition, titles, subheads, spelling, nonverbal gestures, paralinguistic phenomena, objects in the environment, a shared history of events

and discourse, and the obligations that accompany social roles when they communicate, we have a framework from which to operate.

In moving from oral to written texts there are sometimes examples of combining elements from the two genres. One might move from an oral version of the story to a written one by adding: a title, formulaic sentence, literary diction, features of detachment such as changing a direct quote to an indirect one ("I hate you, man" to "I used to look in the mirror and say that I hated myself"). There may be increased lexical density and a general change in lexical choice. The rhetorical devices used in the oral version—figures of speech, repetition, parallelism in the grammatical system, will be retained but the paralinguistics must show up in paragraphing and punctuation. In fact, Lakoff (1982) and Heath (1986) write about the trends in modern literature to use more oral strategies in creative writing. It is reasonable to suggest that details of intonation, rhythm, pause, and other paralinguistics perform the functions in speech that punctuation, capitalization, italicization, paragraphing, etc. perform in written language. Because the literate features may serve as devices to carry prosodic features over from the oral medium, I try to show the students how to match punctuation, paragraphing, and quotation marks with indications of spontaneous oral speech such as hesitations, ellipses, and repetitions while retaining some of the liveliness of the oral features.

They learn, then, some of the standardized notions about literacy and the expectations of a literate society. They come to understand that when the conversation is not face to face ideas must be stated in clear, precise language. They realize that punctuation and paragraphing are features of order and structure that replace such items as tonal shift and other prosodic elements. They learn the inappropriateness of fillers and stops and starts that lack coherence. They understand that the metaphors and imagery create vivid pictures where facial and body gestures were adequate in orality. They learn the temporality of literate stories as opposed to the oral recountings. They discuss subordination and sentence variety as well as sentence completion while admitting that repetition still has a place. All these strategies become the classroom standard for writing. Subsequent to this in-depth discovery, a sample of an oral story with a literate translation is practiced with on the board. The students are then instructed to translate/convert their oral stories

into literate ones. That means they complete sentences, subordinate some ideas, include punctuation and paragraphing, eliminate inappropriate words and fillers, organize around the shaping idea, and otherwise elaborate the language and vocabulary by including more PIESIP details.

Our obligation as “windows on the world” is extensive. One of the choices that we make that allows our students broader options is the use of word processing. I teach my students writing using the computer and Microsoft Word. Each subsequent draft is to be word processed following the initial oral transcription. For their translation drafts they are told to think carefully about what their intention is in telling the story and what they want the audience to go away knowing. I ask them to think about whether they want to make this a descriptive essay, a cause and effect analysis, an argument. From this decision they develop the shaping idea. That shaping idea is placed at the very beginning and end of the draft. In addition, they are told to highlight each type of PIESIP detail using boldface, underlining, and different font sizes depending on whether the detail reveals a physical, intellectual, or other aspect.

Once this is completed they bring the draft to a peer group for an audience analysis. The audience responds to questions such as: What is the shaping idea? How does the story affect you as a reader? How effectively has the writer used PIESIP? (Because the details have already been highlighted, it helps the group discover them more easily.) Has the experience/story been recreated for you? What are some of the best details? What details need more development? and overall, how should the paper be revised to fulfill the shaping idea? For revision they are asked to think in terms of adding, deleting, substituting, and rearranging details. Based on the audience analysis and teacher conferences, the students revise their essays and submit the final drafts.

Making connections between telling a story and understanding and interpreting that story helps the students feel confident about discussing and writing an informative, detailed, vivid, and intriguing essay using what has been learned.

The results are very encouraging. In a survey students revealed an interest in their classmates’ lives and their ways of thinking and feeling. They demonstrated an appreciation of the differences and a willingness to ask questions otherwise unanswered. Through this three- to four-week exercise I was able to achieve educational goals of interaction with the oral and writ-

ten text, while providing a means by which a sense of the community could be achieved. The choices I made were out of respect for the student as learner and a desire to broaden the multicultural students' conversation with the larger community. By the students' participation they become active members of the community through shared knowledge while developing skills in the writing process. My colleagues also notice a difference in the essays written by these students. In the portfolio readings, these essays are often selected as exemplary of good writing. The choices I make in teaching this lesson have long-term effects on the students and bring them into the multicultural, multiethnic American community as dynamic participants.

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