Learning that Lasts:

Teaching-Stories - A Unique Tool for Educators

"...these stories provoke fresh insight and more flexible thought in children. Beautifully illustrated."
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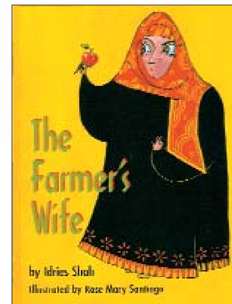

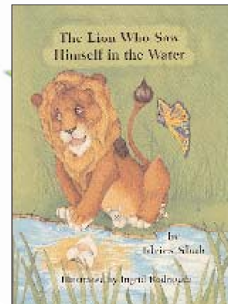

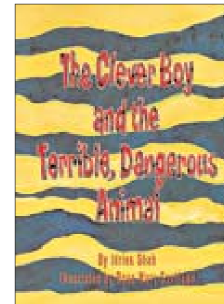

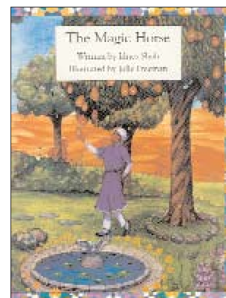

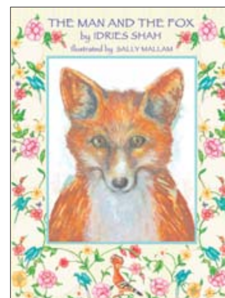

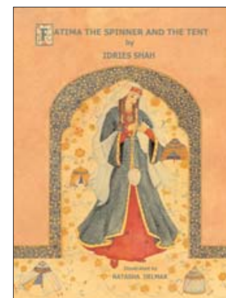

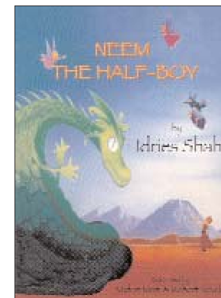

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Learning That Lasts:

Teaching-Stories - A Unique Tool for Educators

Introduction

Educators and psychologists recognize that it is important to help children to develop problem-solving, analytical and analogical thinking skills. These skills encourage a lifelong love of learning and the habits of mind that enhance children's experiences and potential as they continue their school careers and become young adults.

To do this, we need to use tools that encourage higher-level and critical thinking, foster empathy and conflict resolution, promote social and emotional skills which studies now show play a critical role in academic success.[1]

The Teaching-Story is just such a tool. These stories combined with best-practice strategies provided in the activity guides and lesson plans that accompany them ensure that this critical learning can take place.

[1] *No Emotion Left Behind*, August 16, 2005, *New York Times*. Timothy P. Shriver chairman of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning and of the Special Olympics, and Roger P. Weissberg professor of psychology and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and president of the collaborative.

This booklet describes the unique qualities of the Teaching-Story and how current brain research views this genre as beneficial. It explores higher-level thinking skills, such as analogical and contextual thinking, and describes how these are improved by the careful use of these stories. We look at the value of open-ended questions. We see that social and emotional, as well as empathetic benefits can be reaped when we use Teaching-Stories. Finally, we examine strategies, such as the use of meaningful repetition that will help us ensure children's successful use of this material.

The Importance of Teaching-Stories

We construct our world through the stories we hear and tell

We tell ourselves stories from the moment we are born. From infancy through adolescence and on into adulthood, consciously or unconsciously, what we hear and see in the actions and behavior of those around us, in the media to which we are exposed, and in the books we read, all contribute to our stories and to our views of ourselves and our world.

Our memories are largely stored in the form of stories, and these stories greatly affect who we are and who we can become. If we could, we would expose our children only to stories that nourish their capacities and gifts and support the fulfillment of each child's unique potential.

Teaching-Stories develop thinking skills and perception

The Teaching-Story is an art form that has existed all over the world for thousands of years. Storytellers told tales that not only entertained and provided an oral history, they also recounted stories especially designed to develop human thinking skills and perception. Such stories were told again and again to young and old alike.

While this storytelling tradition is still common in Afghanistan and other parts of Central Asia and the Middle East, it is largely unknown in Europe and America. People in the Middle East and Central Asia understand that some stories are designed specifically to nurture not only the intellect, but also the social, emotional, intuitive and perceptive abilities. Now, many Western psychologists and educators exposed to Teaching-Stories agree with this analysis.

Brain Research

A scientific understanding of the Teaching-Story

In a recent lecture at the Library of Congress, psychologist Robert Ornstein, a pioneer in studying the brain's two hemispheres, said that researchers have found that reading Teaching-Stories activates the right side of the brain much more than does reading informational text. Ornstein, considered one of the world's foremost experts on the brain and who has taught at Stanford, Harvard and University of California at San Francisco, says, "The right side of the brain provides 'context,' the essential function of putting together the different components of experience. The left side provides the 'text,' or the pieces themselves. Familiarity with these stories can expand context: enabling us to understand more about our world and our place in it."[2]

Ornstein sees these stories as key to our basic cognitive development, leading the child and then the adult to learn more about what happens in the world and when and how events come together. "It's as if we had the unassembled parts of a bicycle, and knew, through analogy (the shapes perhaps), that there was a relationship between

[2] Robert Ornstein, "Teaching-Stories and the Brain," Library of Congress lecture, 2002.

the handles and our hands, the pedals and our feet, and so on. We may even have an idea that these are a necessary part of what is known as 'a bike' and 'of riding a bike.' But to actually assemble the bike correctly, then to be able to ride it, when and where to ride it, etc., that requires contextual thinking: seeing each disparate part as part of a whole. That 'whole,' of course, expands with experience and understanding. A comprehensive study of Teaching-Stories provides what is, for all intents and purposes, a limitless whole."

He points out that Teaching-Stories exist in all cultures and that an analysis of the stories throughout the world shows that the same stories occur time and again in different cultures.[3] "It is the 'Disneyfication' of such stories – the selection and retelling of only those elements within the original that have a strong emotional appeal – that has lead to the temporary demise in Western culture of the Teaching-Story as a developmental instrument."

"Teaching-Stories have been part of all cultures from time immemorial," says Ornstein, "but only recently, thanks to the work of the Afghan author Idries Shah, who collected hundreds of these, have they been available for study by Western scholars and their psychological significance appreciated."

The Teaching-Story is an educational tool that can help our children develop analogical and contextual thinking skills, and dialogic inquiry. These higher-level skills will assist them throughout their lives.

[3]For examples of such stories see *World Tales* by Idries Shah.

Teaching-Stories Expand Contextual Thinking

The unique qualities of the Teaching-Story

Teaching-Stories acknowledge a student's individuality and uniqueness; they encourage a sense of confidence, responsibility and purpose. They foster in children a belief in their ability to live positive and fulfilling lives and to recognize and welcome challenges and changes when they are indicated. In addition, they facilitate a growing understanding of life, love and learning.

These stories are different from other tales. On the surface, they often appear to be little more than fairy or folk tales, or sometimes just jokes. Their design, however, embodies – in the characters, plots and imagery – patterns and relationships that nurture an area of the mind not reachable in more direct ways. Thus, working with these stories increases our understanding and breadth of vision, as well as our ability to think critically.

The structure of Teaching-Stories is different from the usual stories to which we are accustomed. While many stories arouse fear, presenting an emotional resolution, or simply telling children what they ought to do or think, Teaching-Stories are more subtle; they suggest more helpful ways to deal with difficulties and perspectives to help solve problems calmly. They encourage the flexibility of thought essential to understanding and coping with our complex world.

Often these stories contain improbable events that lead the reader's mind to new and unexplored insights. They allow us to appreciate more alternatives in a situation and so make more informed choices. Through them, we can develop a better understanding of human behavior and motivation.

Some stories seem to trap our sequential, logical mode of thought and, by "striking it a blow" and tip us into thinking in a more intuitive, contextual mode, e.g., *The Farmer's Wife* (see description of this story on page 15). They change our automatic way of thinking, for a time at least, and encourage our brain to make new connections (e.g., the many tales from the "Mulla Nasrudin" corpus or *The Book of the Book* by Idries Shah, pub. Octagon Press).

Not only do these stories enrich contextual and intuitive thinking, they also enhance analogical thought. "The right hemisphere is best at recognizing the relationships between entities, which is at the core of analogy."[4] Children can be encouraged to extrapolate from the events and characters in these stories to those in their own lives. When we encourage analogical thought in our children, we help them develop flexible, inventive minds that can meet the challenges of life in and out of school.

Teaching-Stories are not overly difficult to read, so they allow access for even learners with limited reading ability. But the simplicity of the reading levels belies the complexity of thinking and discussion that can take place, making Teaching-Stories a perfect vehicle for a variety of learners.

The Importance of Analogical Thinking

Even young children think analogically

Holyoak and Thagard in their book *Mental Leaps*[5] give an example of a child's ability to think analogically. Neil is a four-year-old who

[4] *Ibid.*, Ornstein.

[5] K. J. Holyoak, P. Thagard, *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought*, MIT Press, 1996.

is pondering the deep issue of "what might a bird use for a chair?" He initially decides that the tree branch might be the bird's chair and his mother praises him for his answer, adding that the bird could sit on its nest as well, which is also its house.

Several minutes later (and time is an important factor in this process), Neil has second thoughts and says that the tree is not the bird's chair, it is its backyard. Neil here makes a mental leap. He is now trying to understand the entire world of the unfamiliar in terms of his own familiar world. He is thinking analogically.

The child's everyday world is his only reference, a known world that he or she already understands in terms of familiar patterns. In this example, Neil knows people sit on chairs and houses open onto backyards. The bird's world is a relatively unfamiliar one that Neil is trying to understand through his own familiar one.

Holyoak and Thagard conclude that young children without any formal training have a natural capacity to reason by analogy. We need to foster this ability so that as children mature, their thinking becomes more sophisticated, flexible and comprehensive. Specially selected stories can help in this.

In one study, also quoted in *Mental Leaps*, college students were asked a version of the following problem:

A patient has a stomach tumor. There is a type of ray which can destroy the tumor, but, in doses strong enough to damage the tumor, it will also damage healthy tissue. How do you use the rays to destroy the tumor without damaging the healthy tissue?

Only about ten percent managed to come up with a solution. However, that figure was dramatically increased – to seventy-five percent – when students were allowed to read a version of the following story first and told to apply it to the problem of the tumor:

Once upon a time, there was an impenetrable fortress. There were many roads leading to it, but all of them were mined. Very small groups of men could pass

down each of the roads but any large invading force would be blown up. One day, a clever general divided up his army into small groups and sent a detachment down each road. They attacked from every direction, and the fortress fell.

Although in the version given to the college students some extraneous material was also included in the story, they had no difficulty in applying it. This exactly mirrors the process whereby children in Central Asian and Middle Eastern cultures are told traditional "tales" – known in the West as Teaching-Stories – which, it is believed by the community, will be of use to them in later life.

It is now known that children are able to make simple analogies as early as the age of two, something that we observe when a child plays with her doll as if she were the mother and the doll her baby.

This is analogical thought, using the structure of the known to identify with and act "as if," in this case, the child were a mother. This is a new experience for the child, one that enables her to understand, integrate and empathize with her mother, mothers and caregivers in general, mothers of any nationality or even species, and so on – the "context" of such situations.

Brain-Compatible Teaching

Learning requires the brain to construct meaning, i.e., to make connections between the new information and an experience that is already known to the learner.

The brain naturally constructs meaning when it perceives relationships and those relevant or meaningful connections motivate the brain to be engaged and focused.

"The overwhelming need of learners is for meaningfulness…We do not come to understand a subject or master a skill by sticking bits of information together. Understanding a subject results from perceiving relationships. The brain is a pattern detector. Our function as educators is to provide our students with the sorts of experiences that enable them to perceive the patterns that connect."[6]

Constructing meaning is the major requisite to learning and the core of intellectual processing.[7] When we make analogies, we are constructing meaning by relating something that is both emotionally and intellectually familiar to us with the new information. This adds relevance to our learning experiences and ensures that the learning will be remembered.

Teaching-Stories provide rich source material for analogical thinking

Analogical thought provides a powerful mechanism for understanding ourselves and our world, our origins and our destiny. Analogy is used in building scientific theory and in writing poetry. It is used in myths and legends. Coming to an analogical insight – an "Ah-Ha!" moment – is a fulfilling experience; it feels good no matter how young or old we are!

It is this innate ability that we encourage and build on when we use the Teaching-Story. One can say, in Holyoak and Thagard's terms, that Teaching-Stories, and there are many hundreds of them published for people of all ages, provide the richest "source analogs" available to us for the development of our own and our children's potential. As you use these tales with your children, you too may come to new, more sophisticated insights.

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[6]Renate N. Caine, Geoffrey Caine, *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain, Rev. Ed.* Dale Seymour Pubs., 1994.

[7]Yvette Jackson, PhD, National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, "Reversing Underachievement in Urban Students: Pedagogy of Confidence" in Costa, A., *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*, ASCD, 2001.

By allowing students to juxtapose situations, characters and events that occur in Teaching-Stories with those that occur in their own lives, we enhance their ability to understand, through analogy, aspects of their lives that may otherwise perplex or confuse them. When children start to think in this way with these stories, they begin to experience a social and emotional growth. This will continue: as their experiences increase, they will concurrently gain additional analogical insights from each tale.

Teaching-Stories are instrumental: they provoke thought, action and understanding

As Ornstein says, the Teaching-Stories are highly contextual. That is, if we keep a place for them in our minds, we will see that they contain dimensions of meaning that each of us can use when situations which are structurally similar arise in our everyday experiences. Having this rich contextual source available at a time when it is relevant encourages greater understanding, real insights, and flexible thought, all of which lead to more options and so the possibility of more productive action.

Teaching-Stories seem superficially simple, but are not

Because these stories seem simple, there's a danger that we will look for a single moral or message, that we will use a story for psychoanalysis or react with a wiseacre response, or think this is "just another tale for children" and then dismiss it. We should avoid this because it completely destroys the ability of the story to function. In order to stay with a story, we must resist the temptation to reduce it and not to behave as, for example, the old woman does in *The Old Woman and the Eagle* (see description of this story on page 17 of this booklet).

Teaching-Stories are carefully designed to show effective ways of defining and responding to common life experiences. A story is an especially good vehicle for this kind of communication because it imbeds into our consciousness in ways that direct instruction cannot. Adults, who have more experience upon which to draw, may see additional depths in these stories. In fact, many parents and teachers find that these stories are useful for life: yielding richer meanings and insights as we mature and reflect on them and see them from our own daily experiences.

In order to extract the most benefit from these stories, we must work with them over time and on multiple occasions. These stories can be used in much the same way that we employ mnemonic devices, such as "Thirty days hath September," which helps us remember the number of days in the months, or when we commit geometric formulae to memory in order to solve problems.

We want our children to learn these stories "by heart": not by rote, but to make each one their own. Only then can they deepen and

expand their understanding of the stories and use them. As we saw with Neil and the bird's world, time deepens understanding. We can use the strategy of repetition to help with both these aspects.

Repetition is essential for children, it allows them to develop understanding

To profit from the rich complexity of these stories, we and our children need to make them our own.

Children will enrich their understanding of each tale by hearing or reading it many times because repetition gives learners the opportunity to extract more and more from them.

In *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, the notion of repetition is examined. "For younger kids repetition is really valuable. They demand it. When they see a show over and over again, they not only are understanding it better, which is a form of power, but just by predicting what is going to happen, I think they feel a sense of affirmation and self-worth."[8]

Under ordinary circumstances, older children and adults consider repetition boring because it requires reliving the same experience again and again. However, Teaching-Stories are designed specifically to provide levels of meaning, so that as we read them over months and even years, additional insights, understandings and perception can be gleaned. As teachers, we can utilize well-designed activities that alter the focus of every reading, demonstrating the potential richness of this material and enhancing each learner's experience of the story.

[8]Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, Little Brown, 2002.

In any event, Gladwell's findings show that for young children, "repetition isn't boring. Each time they experience something they are experiencing it in a completely different way. In order for repetition to be useful to children, each occurrence must provide another level of understanding and meaning." As we and our children read and learn Teaching-Stories, we can all experience new levels of understanding and meaning.

One of the strategies that support repetition and encourages levels of understanding and meaning is to ask open-ended questions that encourage children to look more and more intensely at the story.

Open-ended questions encourage analogical thought

Although we need to be sure that each child knows and understands the factual elements of a story accurately in order for it to work analogically, we should not confine ourselves to recall questions.

We need to ask questions that engage the child in making her/his own assessments of the situation and that encourage analogical thought. We might ask, after reading *The Lion Who Saw Himself in the Water*, "Have you ever seen in your reflection something that you had never seen before and thought it was something other than what it was?" "What happened to allow you to see it for what it was?" "Did it ever surprise you as it did the lion?" "Do you ever get afraid when you see someone else afraid? Or, do you ever do something because others around you are doing it? Why do you think that is?" With this type of question, there is no incorrect answer as long as the child can defend his/her thinking. This type of dialogue with children is critical because it helps them make inferences and encourages their comprehension. With Teaching-

Stories, in particular, open-ended questions encourage analogical thought and leave the door open for deeper and deeper levels of understanding.

Encourage dialogic enquiry in classrooms

Small-group discussion, say of four or five children of varying abilities and temperaments, can generate a conversation, guided gently by your input of open-ended questions. These conversations provide a forum for leaps in understanding, communication, and co-operation. Children will have their own questions and theories that they can negotiate with others. Small groups encourage us all to listen to each other and legitimize each other's point of view.

Conclusion

Educators will be able to accelerate learning by using Teaching-Stories in the classroom. Children will improve their contextual and analogical thinking by working with these stories and engaging in open-ended discussions about them. Through these stories they will discover alternative ways of seeing and coping with their complex world.

Through repeated experiences with these highly nutritious materials, children gain a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem.

By helping our children make each Teaching-Story their own, we will help them better understand human behavior and motivation, and so promote their social and emotional development. We will provide them with tools that will help them solve problems, improve their prediction, intuitive and perceptive skills, and lead happy, productive and meaningful lives.

The use of Teaching-Stories in our classrooms provides endless possibilities for our learners. This is learning that lasts.

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– **The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art**

"These Teaching-Stories can be experienced on many levels. A child may simply enjoy hearing them, an adult may analyze them in a more sophisticated way. Both may eventually benefit from the lessons within." – **Lynn Neary "All Things Considered," NPR News, Washington**

"…a series of children books that have captivated the hearts and minds of people from all walks of life. …Through repeated reading, these stories provoke fresh insight and more flexible thought in children. Beautifully illustrated." – **NEA Today,The Magazine of the National Education Association**

"…unique quality as well as rich art will invite discussions of difference in the characters and meanings of tales across cultures…a welcome addition to traditional literature collections."
– **School Library Journal**

"There is an innate potential in these books for supporting skills such as prediction, critical thinking, and social/emotional development skills of demonstrating empathy and conflict resolution."
– **Laurie Noe, Ed.D., Director of Education, Literacy Caravan, Weston Woods Institute**

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