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Storytelling as an Intergenerational Classroom

Activity: A Case Study

Mary Cherian & Doris Martin

INTRODUCTION

John was rolling up the kites he had just shown the class of young children. Little Benjamin, who had not said a word during the whole session, came up to him, put his hand on his knee and whispered, "John, I saw Michelangelo on T.V. yesterday."

"You did? I'm glad," replied John. Benjamin nodded his head happily. The two smiled a good-bye to each other. John picked up his kites and left the room.

Did John know that Benjamin was referring to a 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle' and not the artist? In any case, would it have mattered? The two had reached across an age difference of six decades and made a precious minute-long connection. If John was surprised by the leap from kites to Michelangelo, he did not show it. As for Benjamin, he must have sensed that John would be interested in what he had to say and that it would be all right to say it at that point.

The next day, the teacher asked John what he made of the conversation with Benjamin. "It's sharing...that's what it is. I shared my stories. So he shared one of his," John replied. That, in a nutshell was what the intergenerational activity had been all about: the sharing of experience and emotion, of snatches of history and of storytelling, an art that is very much a part of our cultural heritage. This paper presents a case study of the storytelling activity John (pseudonym) carried out. The purpose of the case study was to explore the experience of conducting an intergenerational storytelling session in a classroom setting.

JOHN TELLS HIS STORIES

It was the first time an intergenerational activity was being planned for that particular class during social studies. The teacher was a little apprehensive about an older person's ability to hold the children's attention for a whole class period. But John did not seem to have any such concerns. He was delighted at the prospect of being the guest storyteller.

"Sure, I can tell stories. I can tell stories about myself for hours!" he responded. John was sixty-four. He was a part-time electrician. The

school used his services for minor works. The children knew him as the tall man with the big smile who occasionally strode in and out to repair the classroom equipment. He was a familiar figure but they knew very little about him.

On the morning of the activity, John was seen pacing in the hallway, rehearsing his opening lines, "Hello, children...hi there...good morning everyone." By the time John entered the classroom, he was in high spirits. The children sat on the floor, in the front area of the room. A child-sized chair had been placed before them. It was for John. For a moment, he eyed it. He knew he would have difficulty using such a low chair. He replaced it with the chair at the teacher's desk and was ready to start.

John began to tell his stories. He took the class back to his childhood in the 1930's. His words painted scenes of a little boy in knickerbockers, playing marbles in the yard and steering clear of the class bully. He talked about flying kites with his daughters and how his first wife died of cancer. Over the next half an hour, the class lived through more than half a century, and even made it to Germany and England before coming back to the present.

At first, the children listened intently but after a while, several children began to fidget and look around. The teacher was about to intervene. Then John held up three empty containers: a soft drink bottle, a tennis-ball carton and a film canister. He challenged the children to figure out how he turned the containers into birdfeeders. The children responded eagerly. John pretended to misunderstand their suggestions and soon had the class giggling. He knew he had recaptured their attention. Then, showing them a tall birdfeeder, he explained how he had made it with discarded containers.

Putting aside the birdfeeder, John pulled out a large roll of material from behind a bookshelf. Eyes widened and jaws dropped as John unrolled the biggest kite they had ever seen. As he propped it up against the wall, he talked about the very first kite his father made for him out of newspaper. John informed them that the kite he held before them was older than their teacher. "How old is it?" the children queried. "Thirty," he replied proudly.

"That's not as old as my parents. My mom is thirty-two and my dad is thirty-seven," responded Cheryl triumphantly, as if the announcement had outwitted John in some way.

As John continued, he almost lost the children's interest several times but he kept the children's attention by shifting pace and changing subjects. John understood the role of the storyteller: he knew the craft

of reworking his material artistically and adapting it to meet the demands of his audience. John kept the students engaged with questions that teased and the children loved every minute of it. He had a second kite to show them and it was even larger.

“That’s not a kite. That’s a hang-glider!” shrieked Rani. It was, indeed, large enough to be a glider for her. John promptly told them about a hang-gliding competition he had witnessed. He held up the kite and moved it through the air as he talked. Then he sat down for a while. John was beginning to look tired. He glanced at his watch. The teacher took the cue and thanked him.

It was soon after that that Benjamin approached him. Some children hovered around as John rolled up his kites. On his way out, Monica called out, “I love your birdfeeder, John.” With a broad and satisfied smile, John strode out. Over the next few weeks, he commented to several school personnel how much he had enjoyed himself.

BENEFITS

This activity demonstrated the power of storytelling. A tale is best told aloud, spontaneously (Adams, 1980). Reading from a book is not quite the same although that, too, has its merits. A second aspect of the activity was its intergenerational nature. The combined effect of an intergenerational storytelling activity led to a stimulating classroom experience for all concerned. Of the many benefits, three will be elaborated upon below: the value of demonstrating a life skill; enhancing socio-cognitive development through storytelling; and providing *swatura* experiences for children.

Demonstration of a Life Skill

John had modelled for the class a time-tested craft that both the children and teacher would stand to gain by learning. The narrative impulse — the need to tell or listen to experience and imagination structured into plot — is one of the traits that make us human (Burrison, 1989). The professional storyteller is still with us but surely, this is a skill that all of us would find useful. Be it around a campfire or at family re-unions, stories can bring people closer. No wonder then that the art of storytelling has been with us for thousands of years.

Storytelling is a life skill that provides for sharing of experience and wisdom in a caring context. A story can be a mutually satisfying experience for the listener and the teller. The exchange is spontaneous, usually voluntary and intrinsically motivating. Its rewards are seldom contrived.

Socio-Cognitive Development

The process of learning to tell stories has its benefits too. When a child learns to weave emotions and experience into a tale and tell that tale, he is taking a giant step in socio-cognitive development. In Nigeria, the Yoruba consider teaching children storytelling one of the most direct traditional approaches to promote the development of spontaneous self-expression, assertiveness, acceptance of others, creative thinking and organization of thoughts (Omotoso, 1978). Surely, it can do as much for children everywhere. Some of the benefits result from storytelling being a group activity. Those involved practise listening skills. They also have to learn to take turns, to respect the opinions of others and be sensitive to their feelings. John demonstrated all these as well as the use of language in a nurturing, non-threatening atmosphere. By asking the children questions, John challenged them to think in terms of categories, numbers and relationships. This helps children to conceptualise and problem-solve (Dodge, 1988). Learning information in a meaningful context is essential in helping children understand and develop concepts.

The *Swatura* Experience

At this point, it may be useful to differentiate between stories told purely to entertain and those told to enhance learning. In some gypsy communities, tales are either *swatura* or *paramitsha* (Yoors, 1967). *Swatura* are personal life stories told by respected people of substance and experience. As highly valued but commanding less respect are the *paramitsha*, fairy tales told mainly to pass time during the dreaded winter months when the gypsy communities are least mobile. While *paramitsha* experiences have their value, introducing *swatura* experiences into classrooms can go a long way to enhance teaching and learning.

John, the *swatura* teller in this case, learnt from a parent that several children told their parents about the kites. This ripple effect can result in cultural transmission (Burrison, 1989; Quong & Walker, 2000) in ways that support schools' value education efforts. Part of that value education could help children realise that older adults should be cherished within a community even as young children are. Older persons have much to offer and, if given the respect and dignity they deserve, many of them further children's learning in meaningful and exciting ways (Morgan, 1997; Goh, 2000). Activities such as intergenerational storytelling activities can help remove generational barriers (Hulmes, 1989) so that the first step of connecting with older persons would be possible.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

The activity was a success in the teacher's opinion. In the context of her social studies curriculum, she had slotted the session in to make links between John's life events and World War II. Her other objective had been to help the children understand that older persons were once children like themselves and to realise that people of different ages can connect and communicate. The teacher felt that this objective was also met to a satisfactory degree. More would need to be done but for now, the effort invested in thoughtful planning had been worth it.

On hindsight, however, the teacher reflected on aspects that she should have paid greater attention to. For instance, she realized that a child-sized chair was uncomfortable for John. As the teacher was observing the activity, it also struck her that she had taken for granted John's ability to handle a large class of children. What if he had not been such an eloquent storyteller? To select the right tales and use them to transport the audience to another time and place requires both skill and experience (Omotoso, 1978). John had both. In fact, the teacher commented that she had underestimated John's ability as a storyteller to captivate an audience. All the teacher had known about John was that he was an electrician. She approached him because he fitted the bill in terms of being an older person. But not all older persons are good storytellers. Not all can deal with a whole class of children. The teacher resolved that she would find out more in future to reduce the risk of a less successful outcome. Such planning efforts would be worthwhile as the gains from intergenerational programmes can be far reaching (Brummel, 1989; Seefeldt, 1987).

CONCLUSION

The intergenerational activity with John proved to be mutually satisfying. A valuable life skill — storytelling — was modelled for the children and teacher. Having a wise and knowledgeable older person as the storyteller provided a *swatura* experience for the children. It is hoped that this case study will encourage more teachers to realize these and other benefits for their students by incorporating such experiences into their lessons. As is evident in this case, only minimal resources are needed. Many schools have non-teaching older persons but teachers may fail to identify them as resource persons — potential *swatura* tellers — because they may be seen only as the tuckshop food sellers, the bookstore cashier, cleaners and gardeners rather than as persons with rich life experiences. Just as with John's kites and birdfeeders, the stuff of those older adults' storytelling may cause jaws to drop and eyes to widen as children make meaning of the life experiences of others.

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