
Title	Whose stuff is it?: A museum storyteller's strategies to engage her audience
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Source	<i>Narrative Inquiry</i> , 22(2), 226-246
Published by	John Benjamins Publishing

This is the author's accepted manuscript (post-print) of a work that was accepted for publication in the following source:

Citation: Lwin, S. M. (2012). Whose stuff is it?: A museum storyteller's strategies to engage her audience. *Narrative Inquiry*, 22(2), 226-246. doi: 10.1075/ni.22.2.02mar

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/ni.22.2.02mar>

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Abstract

In this study, I investigate how one museum storyteller engaged her audience at different stages of producing a narrative and how museum exhibits were incorporated into her narrative in the process. The analysis focuses on the interplay among various verbal, vocal and visual features emanating from the teller at different storytelling moments and the audience's outward responses. The study extends our understanding of the ways museum storytelling can enhance the audience's interest in the displayed artefacts as well as in the life and culture of the people associated with these artefacts.

Keywords: museum storytelling; storyteller's strategies; audience's engagement

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Introduction

Traditionally, storytellers served not only as entertainers, but also as sacred functionaries, historians, teachers or healers for both young and old of a society. Through their oral storytelling performances, they were considered to be fulfilling the needs for entertainment, as well as the needs to understand the past or the origins of certain phenomena. In contemporary society, the role of live storytelling performances has expanded to become an effective communication tool in various institutions and professional fields (MacDonald, 1999). Although the conditions and purposes of storytelling may have changed with time in different societies in many parts of the world, live storytelling performances have been adapted to suit and appeal to the tastes of today's audiences, which, in the words of Alembi (1999), is "no longer made up of simple village folk who have no written language" (p. 69). Indeed, adapting to the developments as well as the needs of a modern society, "[c]ontemporary storytelling has constructed itself as a compound of tradition-based performing art and a social agent in a variety of applied fields" (Sobol, 2008, p. 122).

In museums, storytelling sessions are often held for children to enhance their museum experience by arousing their curiosity and facilitating their understanding of displayed artefacts. Realizing their role as educators, museums nowadays are making use of storytelling as an educative, interpretative and meaning-making tool (Frykman, 2009). Hooper-Greenhill (1999) has commented that because museums often display disjointed fragments in the form of objects and artefacts, links need to be made between these exhibits and their contexts, uses, places, times, etc., in order to engage visitors' attention and to help them appreciate, understand and make sense of what they are looking at. In this respect, stories with characters, sequences of events, background descriptions and understandable contexts appear to have the communicative force which helps to harness the visitors' imagination while they

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construct meanings in relation to the displayed artefacts (Frykman, 2009). Therefore, stories which combine fictional characters and events with factual details about displayed artefacts are often created and told by professional or trained storytellers, especially to the children visiting a museum. At the end of the storytelling performance, the audience can explore the cultural collections and/or engage in an activity that reinforces the imagined experience represented in the story.

Although it may appear as a form of entertainment, museum storytelling has specific communicative, persuasive or educational purposes that exist together with or behind its recreational façade. Fisher et al. (2008) describe it as the art of storytelling that enriches museum exhibits and education through narratives. It provides storytellers with an opportunity to create and tell stories based on the museum collections. At the same time, it encourages the audience to respond to and have personal interpretations of the exhibits by placing them in understandable contexts that are (re)constructed through the narrative created and told by a museum storyteller. Thus museum storytelling seems to benefit both the storyteller and audience as “it opens doors of communication and human exchange” (Fisher et al., 2008, p. 12).

Other characteristics of museum storytelling include its performance space which is integral to the museum and the audience which usually involves only a small group of people who are co-present during the moment of telling. In other words, circumstances that can influence the shaping and building of the narrative during the storytelling performance are right there together with the storyteller. Hence, *how* a story is told is often as important as *what* the story relates. In order to maintain a keen engagement from the audience and to lead them to an interpretative frame (Bauman, 1986) that will enhance their understanding and appreciation of the exhibits through a narrative, the storyteller’s strategic uses of verbal and

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non-verbal features in representing elements of the story such as events, characters, their thoughts and action become pivotal.

In this study, I investigate one storyteller's strategies to engage the audience at different moments of a storytelling performance which was held in the Singapore History Museum for children to educate the young museum visitors about the displayed artefacts as well as the life and culture of the people associated with these objects. Central to my analysis is an examination of how verbal, vocal and visual features employed by the storyteller at each stage of producing the narrative helped to maintain the audience's attention to the museum exhibits and facilitated them in their construction of meaning about these artefacts as well as about the people associated with them. Through the analysis, I hope to extend our appreciation of the strategies used by a museum storyteller to engage the audience while enhancing their understanding of the exhibits by contextualizing the artefacts through a narrative that strategically combined fictional characters and events with factual details about these objects.

Analyzing storytelling as performance

Bauman (1992) defines performance as "an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience" (p. 41). It involves the teller's assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, besides the referential content (Bauman, 1986, 1992; Bell, 2008). Thus, while it clearly involves communication, performance is an aesthetic mode of communication in which aesthetic features are foregrounded (Fine & Speer, 1992). Bauman also claims that performances, especially narrative performances, serve as "vehicles for the encoding and presentation of information about oneself in order to construct a personal and

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social image” (Bauman, 1986, p. 21). From this perspective, scholars from various fields have found performance a type of human action which is particularly fruitful to investigate (Fine & Speer, 1992).

In most theoretical discussion of performance, oral storytelling often appears as a case in point to illustrate the nature of performance and its constitutive elements (e.g. Bell, 2008). Birch and Heckler (1996) described oral storytelling as the engine, the expressive heart of human communication systems in all cultures. To Fine and Speer (1992), oral storytelling is a genre, act and event among those in which a person assumes responsibility for presentation to an audience. That is, the storyteller telling a story will have to accept responsibility not only for what they tell (i.e. the narrative), but also for how they tell it (i.e. strategies to engage the audience). Accordingly, the audience of a storytelling performance will have to attend to what is said and done, as well as how it is accomplished (Bauman, 1986, 1992; Bell, 2008).

When analyzed as a performance, the aesthetic dimension of oral storytelling comes to the fore. The focus is on how verbal as well as non-verbal features employed by the storyteller help to engage the audience and set up a special interpretive frame for them to understand the narrative and the act of telling (Bauman, 1992; Norrick, 2000). It is assumed that features used by a storyteller for the construction and projection of a particular storyworld serve as cues for the audience’s perception and reconstruction of the storyworld. A storyworld can be defined as “a global mental representation” or a mental model of “who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate ... as they work to comprehend a narrative” (Herman, 2002, p. 570).

The discourse of an oral storytelling performance is more often than not an infusion of features from verbal, vocal and visual aspects. However, most of the vocal and visual features are often left out in the earlier studies of oral tales in their printed forms. Referring to these

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traditional approaches, Schrum (1996) commented that the art of performance “has eluded the collectors who often chose to ignore the artistic performance for the most part” (p. 83). Thus the later approaches developed by, for example, Hymes (1975), Bauman (1986, 1992), Tedlock (1983), Schrum (1996) and Swann (2002, 2006) advocate analyzing oral storytelling as contextualized performance, along with the paralanguage elements, for a greater understand of the interactive and performative aspects of storytelling. Following these studies, I will examine the interplay among various verbal, vocal and visual features emanating from a museum storyteller at different stages of producing a narrative. Through the analysis, I hope to reveal how the strategies used by one museum storyteller were governed by the museum setting and specific institutional purposes, so that her narrative could carry out its roles as an educative, interpretative and meaning-making tool for visitors to the museum.

A storyteller’s strategies

The storytelling performance which I have chosen to examine in this paper was held at the Singapore History Museum during a *Show n Tell* session for 4-to-6-year-olds. It is from a larger study in which I explore narrativity in oral storytelling performances held in three different institutions – a museum, a school and a library. The *Show n Tell* session is regularly held at the Singapore History Museum, which is located on the bank of the Singapore River. The physical setting for the *Show n Tell* has some artefacts displayed as the background. The theme of the exhibits in that particular section of the museum is the life and culture of early immigrants from China, who lived and worked along the Singapore River in the old days. The artefacts displayed at the background include different types of fishing traps, a chamber pot, a scoop, a mattress beater, a straw hat and a coal iron, which were used by these early

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immigrants in their daily life or work. The institutional purposes of the *Show n Tell* session are stated in the brochure issued by the museum as (1) to facilitate the children's understanding of displayed artefacts, and (2) to arouse their curiosity and enhance their knowledge about the life and culture of the early immigrants to Singapore.

With the permission from the museum and the storyteller, I first audio and video recorded a *Show n Tell* session. I then transcribed the recording and examined in detail for the following features emanating from the storyteller at different moments of storytelling:

- (i) Verbal features (i.e. the use of specific forms of language such as discourse markers, questions, repetitions of words, etc.)
- (ii) Vocal features (i.e. manipulation of voice such as pitch, pace, volume, pause, inflection and tone)
- (iii) Visual features (i.e. the storyteller's gestures, postures, facial expressions, and external objects incorporated into the storytelling discourse). Adapting Cassell and McNeill's (1991) typology, gestures are classified as follows:
 - a. Mimic gestures: Movements of the hands and arms (and the rest of the body) that bear a close formal relationship to the semantic content of speech (e.g. when the storyteller represents different characters by enacting or imitating their actions);
 - b. Metaphoric gestures: Representational gestures like mimic gestures, but corresponding to an abstract idea, not to a concrete object or event (e.g. using two hands to depict the scales of justice when saying, "Decide");

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- c. Beats: Rhythmical moves of the hand according to pulsations of speech, indexing the word or phrase it accompanies as being significant or as creating a summarizing effect;
- d. Deictic gestures: Points indicating objects around the teller, or abstract pointing (i.e. the gesture space may look empty, but to the storyteller it is filled with discourse entities)
- e. Propositional gestures: Gestures made, for example, to measure a particular space or size (e.g. when the teller says, “It was this big”).

I annotated the verbal text and vocal features through the use of typography (see appendix for transcription conventions). For the visual features, I gave succinct descriptions in a separate column. To find out how the storyteller used various verbal, vocal and visual features at different stages of producing the narrative, I will present my analysis for each constituent – namely abstract, orientation (background information, general frame and narrow frame), main action, resolution and coda (Norrick, 2000).

The abstract

The *Show n Tell* session began with self introduction of the storyteller and several individual children, followed by exchange of questions and answers about a few displayed artefacts:

A(1): my name is Sarala

A(1): my name is Matthew

S: ok good morning children,

my name is Auntie Rose

A(s): Auntie Rose?

S: yes so if I'm going to say to you good morning,

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what do you say back

A(w): good morning Auntie Rose

S: are you happy to be here?

A(w): yes

S: yes good.

ok, whose whose stuff is it

A(1): yours

S: mine? ok what do you think if this is mine

what do you think this is

A(s): a handbag

S: a handbag?

The exchange of questions and answers continued as the teller asked the children what they thought a few of the items on the display rack were, before she informed them what these items actually are (e.g. what the children saw as a hand bag was a fishing trap used by the people a long time ago). However, after the questions and answers about a few artefacts, the teller explicitly stated that she would tell the children a story and began to negotiate with the children for the floor rights for a storytelling performance:

S: now I'm going to be very quiet

and tell you a very quick story

do you promise me to be quiet?

Together with the teller's explicit statement about her assumption of the role of a storyteller, the audience was cued to move to a type of engagement in which both the storyteller and audience agree to suspend disbelief and to participate in the (re)construction of

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a storyworld. Following such negotiation for establishment of respective performative roles, the storyteller went on with what appeared as the abstract of the narrative (see Table 1).

As noted in the transcription, the storyteller made a shift to louder volume, higher pitch and slower pace as she began the abstract, drawing the audience's attention to the forthcoming storytelling performance. The deictic gestures pointing to her head and then to the exhibits at the background aptly pre-empted museum storytelling – i.e. what follows is a combination of some facts related to the displayed artefacts but happened in a somewhat fictional realm or in my imagination. When certain words and phrases, such as “in my imagination”, “I wondered” and “I looked”, were repeated in a continued slow pace with pauses, it seemed to create a similar effect that prepared the audience for (a certain degree of) suspension of “the conventions of realist verisimilitude”, which is usually claimed to be created by such phrases as “once upon a time, in a far away land” (O'Neill, 1994). Also in the abstract, the storyteller's self-directed question “who does it belong to”, which was uttered in an upward inflection, helped to stimulate the audience's anticipation of the characters related to the displayed artefacts.

Orientation (Background information – introducing the characters)

After negotiating with the audience to begin the (re)construction of a storyworld, the storyteller introduced the characters in the ways she saw them and the ways the audience was expected to see them in the storyworld. The use of syntactic parallelism, “I saw _____”, and several propositional gestures approximating the height or size of each character was notable at this point of storytelling (see Table 2). Bauman (1986) noted that syntactic parallelism serves as a verbal performance feature that helps to organize and highlight the expressive variant elements. In this instance, through the use of syntactic parallelism, “I saw _____”, the

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storyteller introduced different characters with their specific sets of traits one by one to the audience. Vocal features such as slow paced and high pitched voice with a slight upward inflection were also used to draw the audience's attention to the two characters' ages, which were strategically configured to be the same as those 4-to-6-year-old children participating in this storytelling performance. The propositional gestures estimating the height of a six-year-old girl for the protagonist, a four-year-old boy for her brother, and the size of the little baby, as well as an abstract pointing to their parents, could facilitate the audience in their visualization and recognition of each character being introduced by the storyteller. Occasional verbal prompts from the storyteller also helped to secure the audience's attentiveness to the individuals as identified in the storyworld.

However, an interesting phenomenon occurred at the beginning of the introduction of the characters. A particular response "hey I'm six years old" from a child in the audience appeared as a mismatch in the engagement between the teller (who had assumed the role of a storyteller and was addressing to the audience about the characters in the storyworld or the "other" reality) and this particular member of the audience (who was still interacting as an individual with her real-life identity). The storyteller's subsequent metaphoric gesture to be quiet appeared as a reminder to the child to be part of the audience who had earlier agreed to enter into the "other" reality and to participate in the (re)construction of a storyworld by not interrupting her in the process. Nevertheless, the nod which simultaneously emanated from the storyteller at this point showed that the storyteller has turned this interruption caused by a mismatch in the engagement into an opportunity for her to contextualize the narrative, i.e. to link the character in the story to the audience members' real-life identities. Thus it can be deduced that, when introducing the characters, the storyteller used not only various verbal, vocal and visual features to help the audience in their visualization and recognition of the

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characters, but also a particular strategy, namely contextualization. Contextualization, a process of negotiation in which participants reflexively examine the discourse as it emerges, could enhance the audience's interest in the narrative in progress (Bauman, 1986). By specifically configuring the protagonist and her brother to be about the same age as the 4-to-6-year old participants of this storytelling performance and by acknowledging the link observed by a child between a character in the storyworld and herself as an audience member, the storyteller used contextualization as a strategy to secure the audience's interest in the characters.

Orientation (General frame)

The introduction of characters in the orientation (background information) was followed by the orientation (general frame), i.e. the setting or descriptions of the place where the characters lived (see Table 3).

As noted in the transcript, the deictic gesture which pointed to the actual physical setting around the audience when describing the setting in which the characters lived was another instance of contextualization. The use of the same deictic gesture pointing to her left when she mentioned the river in the storyworld as well as the one in the actual world of the telling encouraged the audience to see the link between the setting in the storyworld and the setting which they could find around them. Subsequently, the storyteller's direct address to the audience drawing their attention to the Singapore River in their vicinity further facilitated the audience's visualization of the setting in the storyworld. The use of contextualization at

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this point of storytelling appeared strategic as it helped to make elements in the storyworld more real and more immediate to the audience, enhancing their interest.

Orientation (Background information – More details about the characters)

The discourse marker “so” signalled the transition to another stage in the narrative development. More details about the other characters Paa and Maa were given. At this point, the storyteller used two strategies which can be noted as characteristics of museum storytelling. The two strategies are (1) incorporating museum exhibits into the narrative as the objects being used by the characters and (2) eliciting the audience’s opinions about these artefacts and encouraging them to infer from their real-life experiences or knowledge about similar objects (see Table 4).

Following the above excerpt, the storyteller gave elaborate verbal description of Paa’s work as a coolie complemented with her gestures mimicking Paa’s action in carrying heavy sacks. In the process, more museum exhibits such as a cotton glove and a hook were incorporated into the narrative as the objects used by Paa in his work. Similarly, another museum exhibit, a coal iron, was incorporated into the explanation of Maa’s work and action (see Table 5).

It appeared that incorporation of museum exhibits into the story, complemented with the storyteller’s mimic gestures for the characters’ action in using these objects, helped the audience to make links between these exhibits and their uses, contexts, etc. This strategy is notable for museum storytelling because it could facilitate the audience’s construction of meanings for the artefacts by placing these objects in understandable contexts such as an identifiable setting and in conjunction with the activities carried out by the characters in a recoverable storyworld, rather than as disjointed fragments on display. Thus, the storyteller’s

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use of such strategies could help the audience to make better sense of the artefacts, enhancing their understanding of what they were looking at.

When incorporation of museum exhibits into the narrative was followed by the storyteller's direct address to the audience eliciting their opinions about why/how the characters might use them, the audience became more engaged with the narrative as well as the construction of meanings for these artefacts. Through the use of elicitation that encouraged the audience to respond by making suppositions about the characters' action or motivation in using these objects, the storyteller made the audience become more experientially engaged with the process of making meaning for these artefacts. In her comments on storyteller's strategies, Birch (1996) observed that a storyteller "offers her point of view to the audience as any persuasive speaker would, without jamming it down the audience's collective throat" (p. 117). This implies that an effective storyteller suggests how an audience might view the same event or object, but she cannot be so dogmatic and didactic that the audience feels they have no interpretative opportunities. In this instance, the storyteller's encouragement to the audience to make suppositions about the characters' action involving the use of certain artefacts and to refer to their real-life experiences or knowledge about how someone might use similar objects, provided the audience with an opportunity to have some personal interpretations of the museum exhibits, making them become more involved and interested in the process of constructing meanings for these objects.

However, Birch (1996) also observed that an effective storyteller needs to acknowledge and, adjust to, with some immediacy, the audience's responses, to make each telling of the story a unique event. This highlights the possibility of getting responses from the audience who might not view the event or object from the same perspective as the storyteller. While giving the audience an opportunity to respond outwardly during the process

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of storytelling can promote their engagement with the narrative in progress, certain responses given from a view different from that of the storyteller, might pose challenges for the storyteller to continue with the narrative. Thus how a storyteller deals with such responses is an important part of her strategies to maintain the audience's engagement while she continues with the narrative in progress.

In this particular storytelling performance, audience's suppositions and responses about the artefacts which did not conform to the expected interpretations of these objects were strategically turned into a backdrop, against which intended interpretations and information about these artefacts were foregrounded. This, I observe, was another strategy used by the storyteller to retain the children's interest in the artefacts. When the characters' action and thoughts about the same objects were highlighted as different against the backdrop of the suppositions that they just made, the audience appeared to become more curious about the artefacts (see Table 6).

Noted in the transcript was a change in the storyteller's posture accompanied with a shift to louder volume and higher pitch when she cued the audience to pay attention to the characters' distinctive thoughts about the object which were going to be different from the suppositions they just made. Such changes, although they were slight and subtle, were empirically detectable as the storyteller's strategy to uphold the audience's engagement as she prepared to re-enter into the "other" reality and resume the construction of a storyworld, after allowing them to respond and make suppositions about the artefacts based on their real-life experiences. When the intended interpretations of the artefacts were given in conjunction with the characters' distinctive action and thoughts, which were contrasted with what the audience could infer, these intended meanings appeared as "new" information for them, a

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strategy that could help to promote the audience's interest in the factual details about the exhibits which the museum intended to disseminate through the storytelling performance.

Orientation (Narrow frame)

As the narrative progressed, temporality and spatialization were narrowed down to more specific time and place; e.g. "one day during Chinese New Year", "when they were walking along the (Singapore) river", "when they came home". At this point of storytelling, the storyteller's use of an embedded narrative was noted as a strategy to keep the audience engaged while she led them to the representation of certain cultural beliefs held by the people associated with the displayed artefacts (see Table 7).

With the embedded narrative, the characters (Ah Mei and Ah Tee) were subordinated to another narrative level. There also was a shift of the narrator from the storyteller of museum storytelling to a certain storyteller whom the two characters met in the embedded narrative. Nelles (2002) has claimed that when the shift in narrator is accompanied by a shift in narrative level (e.g. subordination of the characters), "this automatically entails additional structural and dramatic considerations that may be the sources of meaning" (p. 347). For example, the interplay of elements between embedded narrative and embedding narrative often produces the illusion of a more profound realism (Nelles 2002). In this particular instance, the interplay between embedded narrative and embedding narrative can be seen in their spatial relatedness (i.e. vicinity of the Singapore River as the settings in both narratives) and the two characters (i.e. Ah Mei and Ah Tee involving in both the embedding and embedded narratives). It seemed that by yielding to an embedded narrator whose words (about a dragon, in particular) would later lead the protagonist to her distinctive behavior (i.e. imagining the coal iron as a dragon's head and believing that it would bring her good luck),

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the motivation for the protagonist's distinctive action, which she would carry out when she reemerged in the embedding narrative, was explained to the audience. Thus it can be observed that the use of embedded narrative at this point was the storyteller's strategy to prepare the audience with understanding of the character's motivation so that they would subsequently process the character's distinctive action, which in effect represents a cultural belief of the people associated with the displayed artefacts, as something plausible.

Also in the narrow frame, the vocal and visual features emanating from the storyteller appeared to be pulling the audience's attention to the central object, the iron. These features include onomatopoeic/non-linguistic sounds, beats, mimic gestures, metaphoric gestures and deictic gestures repeatedly pointing to the iron. The focusing of the audience's attention to the distinctive features of the iron at this point of narrative seemed well motivated because these features would contribute to the protagonist's imagination of the iron as a dragon's head in the following constituent.

Main action

The main action constituent was marked by a cluster of several verbal, vocal and visual features, underlining the events which were salient in terms of the narrative development. A notable feature at this point was the use of direct quotations or reporting the dialogues between the characters in direct speeches (see Table 8).

Direct quotations often serve as an important device to "bring the characters closer to the audience" and to "put a scene on stage" (Günthner, 1999, p. 687). By reporting the dialogues between Ah Mei and Maa in direct speeches, the two characters seemed to become animated and "appear" right in front of the audience. Contrastive vocal and visual features emanating from the storyteller helped the audience to identify the speaking personae, e.g.

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- contrastive pitch and pace (relatively high pitch voice and faster pace for Ah Mei, as opposed to relatively low pitch voice and slower pace for Maa) and
- contrastive facial expressions (excited and happy look for Ah Mei, as opposed to serious and calm look for Maa)

The use of these contrastive features seemed to evoke the impression that the audience actually “heard” the characters speak and “witnessed” the salient event of Ah Mei imagining and calling the iron “my lucky dragon”. The centrality of this particular event was also reinforced by the subsequent expressive elaborations on the protagonist’s imagination of a dragon, accompanied by deictic gestures or abstract pointing to its various features, and even the onomatopoeic/non-linguistic sound that a dragon was imagined to make. A spontaneous response from one of the audience member was also incorporated into the storytelling process as an evaluative element. It seemed that by incorporating the audience’s spontaneous response into the storytelling process, the rest of the audience members were prompted to have a relatively uniform interpretation of the event.

The effect of using an embedded narrative in the preceding constituent became apparent at this point of storytelling. A particular belief about a dragon in Chinese culture (i.e. that it brings good luck, as opposed to, for example, the popular depiction of a dragon in the western cultural context as a monster to be killed by a hero on a quest), was strategically presented to the audience through the words of the character quoting the embedded narrator. With the illusion of realism for the character’s motivation created through the use of embedded narrative in the preceding constituent, representation of the character Ah Mei’s distinctive action, which signifies a cultural belief of the Chinese people, appeared more plausible for the audience. Therefore, the use of embedded narrative can be observed as one

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of the strategies used by the storyteller to promote the audience's receptiveness to details about the life and culture of the people associated with the artefacts.

Resolution

A discourse marker “and” and an evaluative statement, “I think it happened” signalled the progress to a new constituent in the narrative (see Table 9).

Another instance of contextualization was noted when the storyteller allowed some audience members to hold the iron, which has been incorporated into the narrative as an object being used by the characters in the storyworld. With the object (the iron) represented in the storyworld “entering” the actual world of the telling, representation of elements in the narrative was linked to the audience's real-life experience. Thus the use of contextualization at this point again helped to make the story more real and immediate for the audience enhancing their interest. Subsequently, the last few events of Ah Mei earning money by doing ironing for other people until the family became richer were represented, confirming the culture-specific belief about a dragon to bring good luck and fortune. A series of beats (as opposed to the elaborate mimic, metaphoric, propositional and deictic gestures used in the preceding constituents) and relatively fewer variations of vocal features at this point of storytelling complemented the verbal summary of the last few events that happened over a span of time in the narrative.

Coda

The storytelling performance came to a close with the coda which asked the audience to bring along their impression of the focal object (i.e. the coal iron) in the story to their next activity:

S: now this is the kind of iron that you are going to make

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would you like to make one?

A(w): yes

S: yes some of you will colour

those who are too young will colour

and some will make

By turning the focal object of the story, which in effect was a museum exhibit, into a stimulus for the subsequent art and craft/colouring activity, this particular kind of closing reinforced the audience's interest in and understanding of the details about a particular artifact. At the same time, it allowed them to appreciate the object not only in relation to the fictional characters and events in the storyworld, but in relation to the real-life activities they were doing in the museum context.

Conclusion

In sum, the analysis showed that in this type of museum storytelling, strategies used by the storyteller to engage the audience are largely governed by the type of museum collections and the specific performance space which is integral to the museum. In this storytelling performance held at the Singapore History Museum for young children, the storyteller's strategic configuration of characters conformed to certain assumptions about the culture of a particular group of people, namely early immigrants from China, which the museum aimed to inform the visitors in connection with the exhibits displayed in that particular section of the museum. Examples include the characters' names (Ah Mei, Ah Tee, Paa, Maa), the father's job as a coolie, the activities of a family that lived near the Singapore River in the old days, and the belief and attitude towards a dragon held by the embedded narrator and the protagonist.

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Commenting on the power of performance to shape, reflect, and embody human identity, Fine and Speer (1992) claimed that “we can better understand cultural identity not by studying the artefacts of museums or libraries, but through observing emergent performances” (p. 2). In this particular storytelling performance, I observe that the storyteller’s strategic representation of events, characters, their thoughts and action which involved the use of certain museum exhibits was guiding the audience to draw relevant propositions which were in line with the messages that the museum aimed to give about the artefacts. By placing the exhibits in understandable contexts, such as identifiable settings and in conjunction with the distinctive action of the individuals signifying certain cultural beliefs, this museum storytelling performance appeared to facilitate the audiences’ appreciation of the displayed artefacts as well as provide them with an opportunity to reflect on the life and culture of the people associated with these objects.

It is incontestable that stories typically do not offer a single meaning, but a set of meanings, and thus allow multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, in this kind of museum storytelling, when stories with specific institutional purposes are told face-to-face, it becomes important and arguably more or less possible for storytellers to control their audiences’ interpretations of elements in the narrative, including the museum exhibits which have been incorporated into the narrative as objects used by the characters. This is so that the audience’s interpretations of the exhibits would be relatively uniform and in line with the aims of the museum, which is to educate the visitors about the artefacts and related cultural contexts.

In conclusion, my analysis of verbal, vocal and visual features emanating from a museum storyteller at different points of storytelling suggests that uncovering the strategies used by a storyteller to engage the audience while leading them to intended interpretations of the exhibits and related cultural contexts is pivotal to understanding the roles of museum

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storytelling as an educative, interpretative and meaning-making tool. It is acknowledged that each storytelling performance is unique and will have emergent aspects depending on the distinctive circumstances such as the audience, the setting and purposes. Nevertheless, as a general rule, it appears that the close relationship between production of a narrative, the performance space which is integral to the museum and clearly-defined institutional agenda in this type of storytelling demands the teller's strategic engagement with the aesthetic as well as communicative, persuasive and educational aspects of an institutionalized storytelling performance.

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Appendix Transcription Conventions

S: Storyteller

A(w): whole audience (in chorus)

A(s): several audience members

A(1): one member of the audience

<i>Descriptions</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Meanings</i>
Each line of transcription		A single intonation unit
Three dots separating two successive lines	line one ... line two	Longer than regular pause between two successive intonation units
Three dots within a line	a ... pause	Noticeable pause between words
Word(s) in all capitals	LOUD	Relatively louder volume
Word(s) in italics	<i>high</i>	Relatively higher pitch
~ before the word	~word	Relatively lower pitch
/ /	/grah/	Non-linguistic sound
One dot (period) at the end	that's the end.	Final falling inflection
Comma at the end	a line,	Slight upward inflection
Question mark at the end	a line?	Final rising inflection

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Table 1 Features in the abstract

<i>Verbal and Vocal</i>	<i>Visual</i>
S: <i>IN MY IMAGINATION,</i>	Deictic gestures (point first to her head and
<i>WHEN I SAW ALL THESE THINGS,</i>	then to the artefacts at the background).
<i>and I wondered</i>	Facial expression (looking thoughtful)
<i>who does it belong to?</i>	
<i>I wondered</i>	
<i>and I looked at it</i>	Posture (turn and glance at the artefacts)
...	
and as I looked hard,	Posture (turn to face the audience)
...	
something came up in my imagination	Deictic gesture (point to her head)

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Table 2 Introducing the characters

Verbal and Vocal	Visual
S: <i>I saw ... a little girl,</i> about six years old,	Propositional gesture (hand showing the approximate height of a six-year-old)
A(1): hey I'm six years old	
S: and her name was Ah <i>Mei</i> , <i>she had a little brother,</i> ...	Nod, a metaphoric gesture to be quiet
about four years old,	Propositional gesture (hand showing the approximate height of a four-year-old)
and his name ... was Ah <i>Tee</i>	
and I saw... <i>another little baby</i> in the room	
a <i>tiny little baby</i> ,	Propositional gesture (hands showing the size of a baby)
...	
and behind Ah Mei and Ah Tee,	Deictic gesture (abstract pointing)
I saw ... <i>Paa</i> ... who was their father,	
and <i>Maa</i> ...who was their?	
A(s): mother	
S: mother	

Table 3 Setting

<i>Verbal and Vocal</i>	<i>Visual</i>
S: and Paa worked along the Singapore River, carrying the heavy loads. ... when you came up, did you see the Singapore river? ... ok when you go down you'll see it A(1): I see it	Deictic gesture (point to her left) Change in posture and mimic gesture Deictic gesture (point to the audience)
S: the Singapore river flows along here. A(1): I saw it	Deictic gesture (point to her left)
S: yeah Ah Tee's father Paa worked there.	Deictic gesture (point to her left)

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Table 4 Museum exhibits as external visuals (1)

<i>Verbal and Vocal</i>	<i>Visual</i>
S: so.. Ah Mei and Ah Tee's father wasn't rich	
they weren't rich	
and Paa... often wore a hat like this	External visual (a hat from the exhibits)
<i>why do you think he wore a hat like this</i>	
when he went to work	
A(1): because he was a farmer?	
A(1): I know because it's hot	
S: yes perhaps he worked on a farm sometimes	Nod
and yes it was very often very hot	Nod
and <i>he worked as a COOLIE</i>	

Table 5 Museum exhibits as external visuals (2)

<i>Verbal and Vocal</i>	<i>Visual</i>

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S: Maa the mother *she worked very hard as well.*

she would cook,

Mimic gesture (cooking)

and she would sew,

Mimic gesture (sewing)

and she would iron,

Mimic gesture (ironing)

and do all kinds of hard work.

and *Maa would often use ... something like this.*

External visual (the coal iron from
the exhibits)

...

what is this

A(s): ir-, an iron

S: *you all are very bright*

Facial expression (looking

have you seen an iron before like this?

surprised)

A(s): [yes]

[no]

S: where did you see one

A(1): I- I've got one at my

S: you have one where

in your own home or your grandma's home

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Table 6 Eliciting and incorporating audience's responses

<i>Verbal and Vocal</i>	<i>Visual</i>
<p>S: <i>what does it look like when it opens</i></p> <p>...</p> <p>A(1): a crocodile</p> <p>S: like a crocodile yes</p> <p>A(1): a shark</p> <p>S: or a shark</p> <p>A(s): and a robot a robot</p> <p>S: ok yes it can look like a robot.</p> <p>BUT I'M GOING TO TELL YOU, REMEMBER AH MEI AND AH TEE? ...</p> <p><i>they didn't know very much about crocodile,</i> because they lived by the Singapore River, and there was too much of activities for the crocodile to live there then but and <i>they didn't know about robots either,</i> they hadn't heard about TV, or er robots in anyway. <i>but they did imagine something else</i></p>	<p>External visual (opening the lid of the coal iron)</p> <p>Beat</p> <p>Nod</p> <p>A change in posture (from standing to sitting, holding the iron in her hands)</p> <p>Deictic gesture (point to her left)</p>

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Table 7 Embedded narrative

<i>Verbal and Vocal</i>	<i>Visual</i>
S: They too imagine that this was an animal of some kind because one day, during Chinese New Year, when they were walking along the river they met a STORYTELLER. storyteller told them stories about ... DRAGON and kings, and warriors. <i>and when they came home,</i> there Maa was ironing and inside... the hot coal glows ... ~ red and the iron the hot iron when it touched the damp clothes, it made the sound ~ hizz ~hizz and then the smoke came from here and the steam from outside from inside the iron, it came out	Deictic gesture (abstract pointing) Beat Beat Beat Mimic gesture (ironing) Metaphoric gesture (glow) Deictic gestures (pointing to the iron)

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Table 8 Features in the main action

<i>Verbal and Vocal</i>	<i>Visual</i>
<i>S: and Ah Mei was watching that</i>	
and said <i>MAA ... YOUR IRON LOOKS LIKE A DRAGON HEAD</i>	Facial expression (excited, happy)
and Maa looked at her	Facial expression (serious)
and she said ~silly ~girl	
~this ~is ~no ~dragon's head	
~this ~is ~an ~iron	
<i>BUT MAA the storyteller told us dragons stories about the dragons and she said that the dragons are very lucky</i>	Facial expression (excited, happy)
<i>MAA SEE THIS LOOKS LIKE A DRAGON and the dragon's head has fire in his mouth and... see these are the whiskers, and this looks like the horns of the dragon.</i>	Deictic gesture (pointing to the iron)
and Ah Mei could imagine	Deictic gesture (abstract pointing)
the body growing out from the back	Deictic gesture (abstract pointing)
and ... the legs of the dragons the four legs	
<i>A(1): I can imagine that too</i>	
<i>S: you can imagine that too can't you</i>	

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A(s): yeah, me too

S: and when Maa put it away,	Mimic gesture
when she finished ironing,	
she took the iron back to the stove,	
she opened it	Mimic gesture
/~grah/	
<i>MAA SEE my dragon has opened his mouth</i>	Facial expression (excited, happy)
and Maa took out all the coals from that,	Facial expression (serious)
and when the iron was cold,	
she put it back.	Mimic gesture
then Ah Mei went to the iron,	
and said... I'm going to call you my lucky dragon	
maybe you'll bring me good luck	

Table 9 Features in the resolution

<i>Verbal and Vocal</i>	<i>Visual</i>
S: and I think it happened	
because when Ah Mei grew up,	
she began to help her mother iron	Beat
because you see it's a very heavy iron you know,	
do you want to hold it for a minute?	
A(w) : yes	
[me me me]	
[I want to hold]	
S: ~oh it's heavy isn't it	Posture (sitting down, passing the
A(s): I want to hold	iron to the audience)
S: when when she was strong enough to carry it,	Posture (taking the iron back from
she began to iron as well,	the audience and standing up)
and because they were doing that,	Beat
they were able to earn some <i>money</i>	Beat
and Ah Mei was able to become richer.	Beat

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