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Author(s)	Sim Hwee Hwang
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Storytelling for Social Studies in the Primary Classroom

Sim Hwee Hwang

Abstract

This paper focuses on the rationale for storytelling in Social Studies, the difference between story reading and storytelling, how to choose a story, learn and tell it. The paper also provides a list of stories that are suitable for Primary Social Studies and suggests ways of how to integrate stories into Social Studies lessons.

“... children who are not spoken to by live and responsive adults will not learn to speak properly. Children who are not answered will stop asking questions. They will become incurious. And children who are not told stories and who are not read to will have few reasons for wanting to learn to read”.

Gail E. Haley

Introduction

The primary Social Studies curriculum in Singapore focuses on the nation's history, geography and economic activities, the lessons learnt from the social issues, the challenges and constraints we face as a small nation without any natural resources except for our people as well as our link with our neighbouring countries in South-east Asia and the rest of the world (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 1999). As Social Studies integrates History and Geography with some basic Economics and Sociology, the subject can be taught in a variety of ways using dramatic techniques, simulations, art and craft and storytelling. However, in this paper, the focus is on storytelling as a strategy for teaching Social Studies. Indeed, storytelling is the world's oldest teaching tool. Since time immemorial, stories are passed down from one generation to another in many cultural settings. Storytelling is able to survive for so long because it is a powerful medium for transmitting knowledge, culture, traditions, beliefs, morals and values of a community. Stories can make us laugh at ourselves, hold our breath, feel excited and be encouraged and uplifted in our spirit when we are down. Through stories, we learn more about ourselves as well as gain insights into humanity and the world we live in.

Why Use Stories for Social Studies?

Stories can be used for Social Studies classes because they can supplement the textbooks and spice up lessons to arouse pupils' curiosity and interest. Stories can enhance pupils' mastery of a topic, its concepts and generalisations. They can help to deepen pupils' knowledge of their own culture, history and heritage, and broaden their awareness and appreciation of other cultures. Stories can also develop pupils' empathy, social and moral values and attitudes, self-confidence and self-esteem. Stories can also bond pupils in a class together when they assist in telling a story and solving the problems of the characters as the plot unfolds. They can take pride in their performance and experience the joy of sharing. Stories can develop pupils' ability to listen, speak, imagine, compose phrases and create stories. Because stories can speak to the heart, pupils can be motivated to be story readers, tellers and creators themselves (Raines & Isbell, 1999; Spagnoli, 1999; MacDonald, 2001).

Stories can either be read or told to the pupils in class. Story reading involves the teacher reading from a storybook to her pupils. She does not have much eye contact with her pupils and she uses her voice and her facial expressions to draw her pupils to the story. In storytelling, the teacher memorises and internalises the story and tells the story without referring to the storybook. She has eye contact with her pupils all the time and she uses her voice, her facial expressions, her gestures and her body language or even props to engage her pupils in the story. She can also involve her pupils in the story by getting them to chant, sing along, clap and dance. Of the two, storytelling is more challenging than story reading as it requires more effort on the part of the teacher to prepare herself before she tells the story. She needs to know the story very well without referring to the storybook at all and she needs to think of ways to involve her listeners. This is especially so if they are young listeners who cannot sit still for long and love to move around or do something together with or for the characters in the story.

How to Choose Stories?

Because there are so many stories that cut across different genres and cultural settings that exist, it is important to choose stories that are suitable for Social Studies. According to Gregory (1996), the factors to be considered are as follows:

- (a) Stories should appeal and speak to the hearts of the teller and listeners. This is important because stories, which are appealing and meaningful, make the most impact on teaching and learning.
- (b) Stories used in teaching should be relevant to the topic taught. For example, "*Lim Bo Seng: Singapore's Best Known War Hero*" retold by Clara Seow is suitable for the Primary 4 topic on war heroes during the Japanese Occupation. To

teach attitudes like care for the environment, stories from “*Earth Care: World Folk Tales to Talk About*” by Margaret Read Macdonald are appropriate.

- (c) Stories should help to achieve the lesson objectives. This is to ensure that learning takes place.
- (d) Stories should be suitable for listeners. For young children, appropriate and expressive language with appealing sounds in stories is particularly important to capture their attention and imagination. For older children, the plot and character development are more important.
- (e) Stories should also offer possibilities for pupil action and participation. Stories which allow pupils to sing, clap, make sounds or dance will enhance their enjoyment of the lesson and engage their attention more.
- (f) Stories should be free from bias and stereotyping in the text and illustrations provided. This is to ensure that appropriate values and perspectives are inculcated in pupils.
- (g) Text and illustrations in stories should be accurate. This is to enable pupils to learn the right thing.
- (h) Stories should have elements of humour, suspense or drama. These elements are ingredients for a good story which will sustain pupils’ interest in the story and lesson.

Greene (1996) and Changar and Harrison (1992) also suggest other factors for consideration. A good story should have a single theme which is clearly defined; a well-developed plot with each incident related to the plot; quick action; believable and well-defined characterisation and vivid word pictures.

Stories for Primary Social Studies

Table 1 shows a list of storybooks which are suitable for Primary Social Studies, which can be obtained from the National Library, as well as stories from the Internet. This is by no means an exhaustive list. To source for more books in the library, go to the collection of folktales in the Children’s Section. Look out for books that are classified under 398.2. Besides books, you can also obtain stories from the Internet. Do a search with the word “storytell” and many sites will be listed.

How to Learn a Story?

According to MacDonald (1993, 2001), you can master a story for Social Studies within a short time by following the steps below:

- (a) Start with a story which you already know or which you are eager to share with your pupils.
- (b) Concentrate on the chosen story. Isolate yourself from the bustle and hustle by locking yourself in a room. Be prepared to pace, talk aloud and gesticulate.

Table 1.
Stories from the National Library and websites.

Stories from the National Library

Singapore Stories

- Chandran-Dudley (2001). *Tales from the Islands of Singapore*. Singapore: Landmark Books Pte Ltd.
- Chay, G. (2001). *Amazing Asian Folktales*. Singapore: AsiaPac Books Pte Ltd.
- Goh, S.T. (1998). *One Singapore: 65 Stories by a Singaporean*. Singapore: SNP Publishing Pte Ltd.
- Goh, S.T. (2000). *One Singapore 2: 65 More Stories by a Singaporean*. Singapore: SNP Publishing Pte Ltd.
- Goh, S.T. (2001). *One Singapore 3: More Singaporean Stories*. Singapore: SNP Publishing Pte Ltd.
- Ling, S. (2002). *Down Memory Lane in Clogs: Growing Up in Chinatown*. Singapore: AsiaPac Books.
- Koh, N. (2003). *My Bowl of Hei Bee Hiang Rice: A Singaporean Growing up in Difficult Times*. Singapore: Victory Knights Management & Consultancy Services Pte Ltd.
- Pugalenti, (2001). *Myths and Legends of Singapore*. Singapore: VJ Times International Pte Ltd.
- Show, C. (1998). *Lim Bo Seng: Singapore's Best Known War Hero*. Singapore: AsiaPac Books.
- Taylor, D. (2003). *Singapore Children's Favourite Stories*. Singapore: Periplus.

Stories from Asia

- Spagnoli, C. (1998). *Asian Tales and Tellers*. Arkansas: August House Publishers Inc.
- Spagnoli, C. (1998). *A Treasury of Asian Stories and Activities for Schools and Libraries*. Wisconsin: Alleyside Press.

Environment

- Bingham, R. (2003). *A Forest of Stories: Magical Tree Tales from Around the World*. Great Britain: Barefoot Books.
- Cherry, L. (1990). *The Great Kapok Tree*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Hobbs, V. (2003). *Stefan's Story*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hooks, W.H. (1996). *Mr Garbage*. New York: Bantam Books.
- MacDonald, M.R. (1999). *Earth Care: World Folktales to Talk About*. Connecticut: Linnet Books.
- Piroutta, S. (1999). *Stories from the Amazon*. England: Wayland Publishers.
- Taback, S. (1999). *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*. New York: Viking.
- Weir, B. (1991). *Panther's Dream: A Story of the African Rainforest*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children.

School

- Dungworth, R. (2000). *Start School: Talk About My Big School*. Auckland: Ladybird Books Ltd.
- Swope, S. (2001). *Amelia's Notebook*. Berkeley, California: Tricycle Press.

Different Cultures

- Friedman, I.R. (1984). *How My Parents Learned to Eat*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
 - Say, A. (1993). *Grandfather's Journey*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
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Table 1.
(continued)

Stories from the Internet

Heather Forest's Story Arts site

<http://www.storyarts.org/library/index.html>

Ministry of Education's Racial Harmony site

<http://www.moe.gov.sg/racialharmony/>

Richard Thompson's site

<http://www.drawandtell.com/hastoryvine.html>

Storytelling Resources

<http://www.folktale.net/resouces.html>

Tim Sheppard's site

<http://www.timsheppard.co.uk/story>

Whootie Owl

www.storiestogrowby.com

- (c) Read the story aloud and listen to the language. Take note of any phrases, chants, songs or onomatopoeic words which seem memorable; or cultural-specific or well-written openings and closings which need to be retained.
- (d) Memorise the key phrases, songs or chants and not word for word. It is more important to share the story and communicate the intent of the music rather than to reproduce the tune and rhythm of the music in the story.
- (e) Analyse the story structure by breaking the story into the opening, the episodes (of development) and the closing. Having a story structure in mind is important because it will help you find your way through the story should you forget.
- (f) Say the story. Put down the text and tell the story in your own words aloud. If you forget, then refer to the text.
- (g) "Repair" the story by taking note of those parts which you have problem memorising. Practise those parts.
- (h) Tell the entire story one more time without stopping. Force yourself to improvise and just keep telling the story.
- (i) Evaluate by taking note of your strengths and weaknesses after each telling. What went well? What aspects of storytelling would you like to keep? What bad habits would you want to get rid of before the next storytelling?
- (j) Practise telling the story as you go about your daily routine. You can practise as you drive to work, wait for the bus or when you have a shower.
- (k) Rehearse one last time before the actual telling. This rehearsal should be a high energy-on your feet-active type of telling whereby you communicate to your imaginary audience as if they are really there.

How to Tell the Story?

After a story is learnt, the next step is to tell it. MacDonald (1993, 2001) suggests the following steps when telling a story:

- (a) Prepare the environment for storytelling. For example, you may ask your pupils to rearrange their seats in a circle if need be. Alternatively, you may create a special “storytelling corner” in class with some bookshelves filled with storybooks and a rug on the floor and ask your pupils to sit on the rug as they listen to your story.
- (b) Prepare the audience to listen. Ensure that your pupils have settled down and are ready to listen to you before you begin your story. Ensure that you have eye contact with them.
- (c) Insert a “pregnant” pause which exists after you have introduced the story. The purpose of this pause is for you to look at the pupils and gather them together as you prepare to tell.
- (d) Prepare the opening bridge of the story. This refers to the opening phrase of the story which acts as a bridge between the world of ordinary conversation and the story world. This opening must be well delivered with confidence.
- (e) Communicate the story by telling it to the pupils. Storytelling is not about recitation or performance. Rather it is about speaking to the audience. Tell the story in your own words.
- (f) Revel in the language by taking time to roll the lush words around on your tongue. Use voice variations and repetitive phrases to draw the young listeners into the story. Enjoy the language.
- (g) Use eye contact, facial expression and gestures. All these will enhance the appeal of the story to your young audience.
- (h) Share enthusiasm and warmth with the pupils. It is infectious and will draw your pupils to the story and enhance their enjoyment.
- (i) Pace yourself by slowing down if need be or speed up as the story develops. Whatever it is, the pace of the storytelling is determined by the story. Do not rush through it.
- (j) Be sensitive to pupils’ responses. Pace the story to suit their needs.
- (k) Encourage pupils to interact and participate in the storytelling. They can clap, sing or chant special words that appear in the story.
- (l) Let the story tell you, the teller, how to move. However, it is important to be true to yourself. Do not try wild gestures if they are unnatural to you or to the story.
- (m) End with confidence. This is the other bridge between the story world and the mundane world. It is important to bring the audience back into their own lives.
- (n) Do not worry about the performance technique. Just share the tales you love most in a simple, direct way.

- (o) Build up your experience over time using riddles, images, rhythm and repetitions, gestures, sound effects and word, music, costumes, masks and other props to hone your storytelling skills.

When to Tell the Story?

Stories can be told at the beginning, middle or end of the Social Studies lesson. When it should be told depends on the objective of telling. If the teacher's intention is to stimulate pupils' interest in a topic, then the story could be told at the beginning of the lesson. However, if the story can help pupils to understand some concepts or generalisations or if the story can imbue some values or attitude, then it is best to tell the story as the lesson develops. However, if the intention is to reinforce the concepts learnt or to wrap up the lesson, then the story can be told at the end of the lesson. Since time is a constraint, there is a need to choose stories that are short, between 5 and 10 minutes long as stories that are too long may not hold pupils' attention easily.

Lesson Ideas

Many follow-up activities can be done after a story is told. A lot will depend on the lesson objectives. Some examples of follow-up activities include doing art and craft, writing story reviews, retelling the tale from another perspective, making new endings, conducting a role play to interview the story characters, conducting a discussion or debate, making comparisons between the story and the actual events or just let the pupils enjoy the story. Examples of how storytelling can be used in Social Studies are illustrated in Tables 2 and 3.

Conclusion

Social Studies can be taught in various ways and one of the strategies that is gaining popularity in schools is storytelling. Storytelling, if used effectively, can enhance content and value learning in Social Studies. The key to effective storytelling is practice. The more you tell, the more confidence you will gain and the easier it will become. You do not need to have a special talent for storytelling. Rather, there is a need to tell the story in a way that is natural to you and be comfortable with it. Nobody can tell a story quite like you, not even professional storytellers. Continue to hone your storytelling skills and open yourself up to the story and the audience and tell it from your heart.

Table 2.
The story of “Sang Nila Utama” for primary three social studies.

Topic:	Singapore Before 1819
Level:	Primary Three
Class size:	40
Class ability:	Average
Time frame:	1 period

Specific instructional objective:

At the end of the lesson, pupils will be able to describe the significant events and people that brought about the renaming of the island of Temasek to Singapore.

Materials

Story of “Sang Nila Utama” taken from Pugalenth’s *Myths and Legends of Singapore*, OHP, OHT backdrops showing different scenes (e.g. forest, look out point, calm sea, fierce storm) and shadow cut-outs (Sang Nila Utama, his followers, deer, boat and lion).

Learning environment: Classroom

Suggested Instructional Activities

Introduction (5 min)

1. Explain to the class that they will be listening to a story of how Singapore got its name. Pupils will help to bring the story to life by producing the necessary sound effects, therefore they need to listen carefully to the story.
2. Assign “roles” to the various sectors of the class. For example, one group will produce jungle sounds whenever the word “jungle” is mentioned in the story; another will produce the sounds of a calm sea, a fierce storm, an animal or a lion. Two pupils will handle the shadow cut-outs and change the scenes as the story develops.

Development (15 min)

- 3a. Tell the story of “Sang Nila Utama” taken from Pugalenth’s *Myths and Legends of Singapore*. (Note that this story is rather long and needs to be shortened. Also there are many difficult words in the story which needs to be simplified for Primary Three pupils.)
- 3b. Pause at the appropriate intervals to allow the change of scenes and the different sound effects to be produced. If the first narration does not run smoothly, teacher will go over it the second time.
4. Pose some questions to check for pupils’ understanding of the story.

Conclusion (10 min)

5. Asks pupils to draw a series of pictures to depict the main events of the story.

Adapted from Lee, P. & Sim, H. H. (2002). “Creative strategies for teaching social studies”. In Tan D. & Ng M. (Eds.) *Training Manual for Primary Three Teachers: Teaching Strategies for the New Social Studies Syllabus*. Singapore: Staff Training Branch, Ministry of Education.

Table 3.

The story of “The Tailor’s Jacket” for primary four social studies.

Topic:	Getting to Know Our Lowlands
Level:	Primary Four
Class size:	40
Class ability:	Average
Time frame:	1 period

Specific instructional objectives:

At the end of the lesson, pupils will be able to:

- describe the causes and effects of environmental degradation.
- brainstorm and generate measures of preserving the environment using “Inspiration”, a visual learning IT tool.
- appreciate that some resources in the environment are limited and they need to value and conserve them.

Prior or prerequisite knowledge or skills:

Pupils have already covered the sections on lowlands, rivers and coasts.

Pupils know how to use “Inspiration”.

Materials

Story entitled “The Tailor’s Jacket” taken from MacDonald’s *Earth Care: World Folktales to Talk About*, white screen, LCD projector and laptop.

Learning environment: Computer laboratory

Suggested Instructional Activities

Introduction (1 min)

1. Using LCD projector, show pupils some pictures on different forms of environmental degradation (e.g. land and water pollution, logging, etc.) and pose the following questions to the class:
 - What does each picture show?
 - What do you think has happened to the environment?
 - What are the consequences of these problems?
 - What are the various ways which you can preserve your environment (home, classroom, school, neighbourhood, country and world)?

Development (25 min)

2. Ask pupils to work in groups and use “Inspiration” to create a concept map in response to the questions posed and save their work on diskettes.
3. Call on some groups to share.

Conclusion (4 min)

4. Add to the measures by telling pupils a story entitled “The Tailor’s Jacket”, a Jewish folklore taken from MacDonald’s *Earth Care: World Folktales to Talk About*. It is a story of how a poor tailor recycled his old jacket into a variety of garments. (Note: Get pupils to guess the type of garment created by the tailor before revealing the answer through the story.)
 5. Discuss the main teaching points of the story with pupils and ask them to act on one measure of their choice for a week and report their observations and learning to the class the following week.
 6. End the lesson by reinforcing the main teaching points of the lesson.
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Sim Hwee Hwang is a lecturer in the Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group. She is involved in the primary social studies and geography education for the pre- and in-service teachers. Her areas of interest are instructional design and web-based learning in social studies and geography.

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