



Transforming Literacy through Storytelling

*A **CLPE** Masterclass with storyteller **Jan Blake***



4th March 2025

A New Direction:

Transforming Literacy through Storytelling

A CLPE Masterclass with storyteller Jan Blake - <https://www.janblakestories.co.uk/>

“Read aloud traditional tales with strong narrative structures, supporting a class culture of oral storytelling. Commit to paper the stories that children tell you, acting as a scribe so that fresh and vivid narratives can reach a wider audience.” **The CLPE Writing Scale**

The importance of oral storytelling is noted in the next steps section of the CLPE Writing Scale from the ‘beginner writer’ onwards. Download the [whole document](#) freely from the website.

Why Storytelling?

“Tell me the facts and I’ll learn. Tell me the truth and I’ll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.” **Proverb**

‘Just as beavers build dams and spiders spin webs, people tell stories.’ **Daniel Dennett, 1991**

‘The roots of story are internalised through the circle of reading, writing, telling and listening.’ **David Almond, 2001**

‘Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution – more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; stories told us what to hang on to.’ **Lisa Cron, 2012**

“Storytelling is the earliest, and most enduring form of education; it has been practised by all peoples, in all parts of the world, ever since humans began to think and to seek to understand themselves and their surroundings.” **Helen East, Storyteller**

“...we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.” **Barbara Hardy, Towards a Poetics of Fiction, 1977 (in The Cool Web, ed. Meek)**

Types of Narrative

- Stories in many languages
- Stories from many cultures
- Memories
- Dilemma tales
- Jokes
- Rumours and apocryphal stories
- Myths, folktales, fables and legends
- Anecdotes
- Accumulators
- Narrative accounts of work
- Number stories
- Personal/family histories

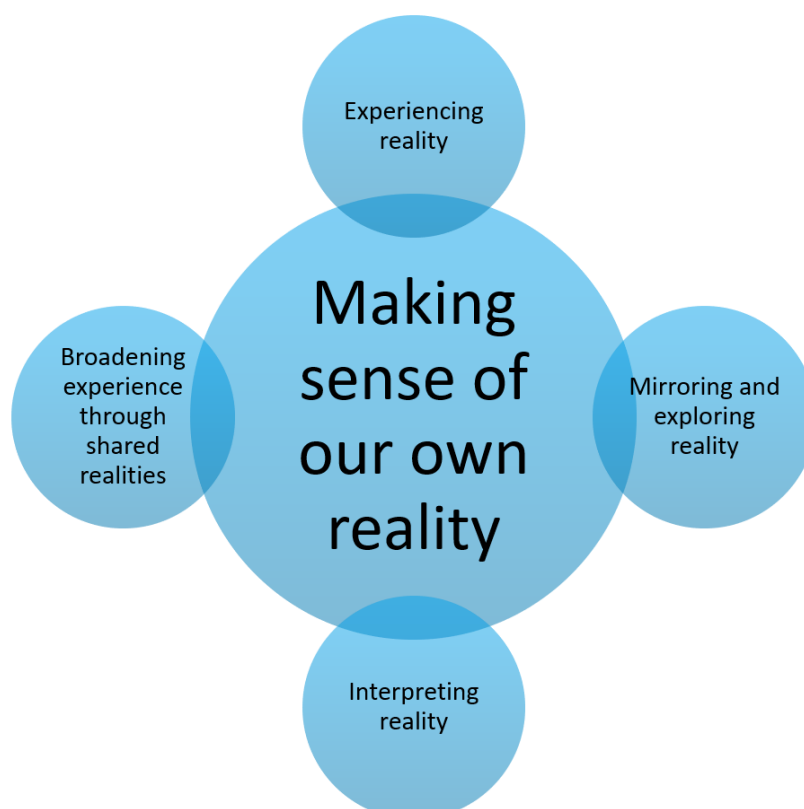
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The Importance of Personal Narrative: Telling Stories from our Own Lives

'We rely on stories to sort out the world. From the stories we hear as children we inherit the ways in which we talk about how we feel, the values which we hold to be important, and what we regard as the truth.'

Margaret Meek, *On Being Literate*



"Anecdote isn't simply a matter of the teller passively transmitting to another person material which already lies fully shaped in the brain. It is an active process in which we vigorously and carefully shape our stories according to our audiences and our purposes in relating the experience."

Alan Howe and John Johnson, *Common Bonds: Storytelling in the Classroom* (1992)

"...because the teacher never asks questions that can be answered by anecdotes, anecdotes cease to be part of [pupils'] own thinking about the subject, and become 'unthinkable' as contributions to class discussions.."

Douglas Barnes, *Language, the Learner and School* (1990)

"Demonstrate where topics come from in the everyday experience, selecting incidents from your own life that will interest your students."

Donald Graves, *A Fresh Look at Writing* (1994)

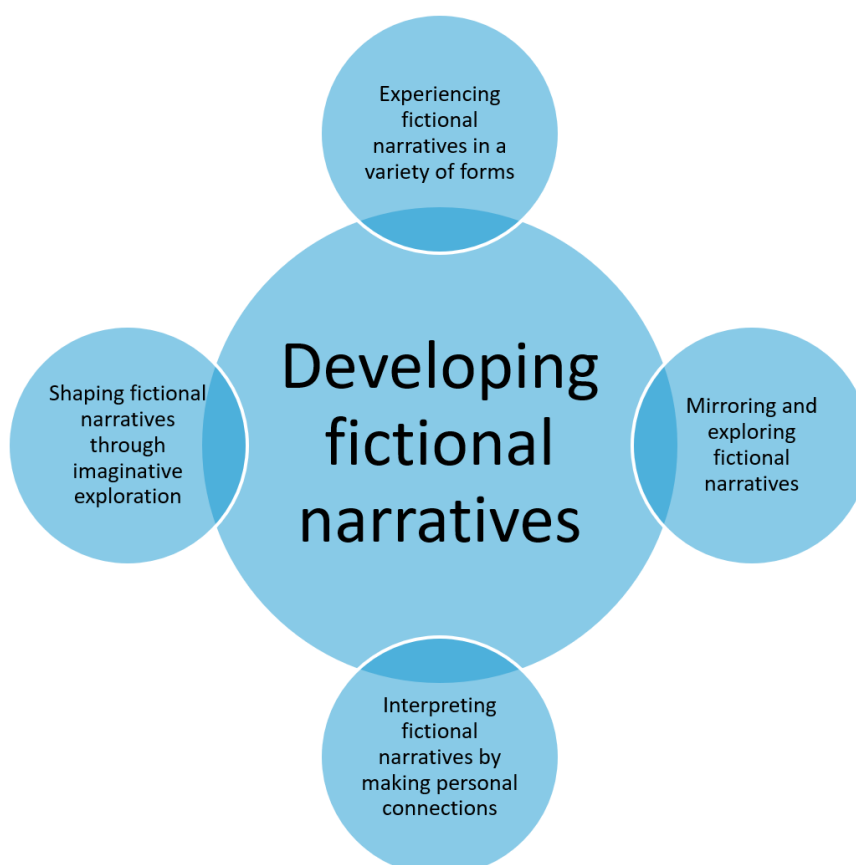
The Importance of Traditional Tales

“Many traditional tales deal with ‘big’ or difficult issues. The tales can help us to handle things that it might be difficult to speak about directly or too literally. Very often these stories might show characters having to make choices, or suffering as a result of greed, or vanity, and so on. The narrative structure can give even young children access to these difficult ideas: for example, a five-year-old girl, after listening to – and participating in – a telling of the story of ‘The Fisherman’s Wife’, exclaimed spontaneously, ‘She wanted too much! She got power mad!’”

Alan Howe and John Johnson, *Common Bonds: Storytelling in the Classroom* (1992)

“Oral stories can give children easy access to complex issues which challenge the human race. The sense and meaning conveyed are not necessarily carried by the plot or the sequence of events, but are invested in the human qualities, the predicaments of the characters and the metaphoric nature of the language. Through exploring issues such as justice and injustice, and the moral codes of the characters, ethics and values can be examined and bridges between reality and fantasy built.”

Traditional Storytelling in the Primary Classroom, Teresa Grainger (1997)



The Benefits of Storytelling

- The more teachers and their students open themselves to playful experimentation with stories the more possibilities there are for varieties of rendering to unfold.
- Through storytelling workshops, teachers recognise and experience their own potential as skilled storytellers, and by modelling storytelling in their classrooms, you enable their students to become more effective storytellers too.
- Storytelling combined with dramatic play, allows children to try on many roles, helping them develop their ability to empathise, increasing understanding of those different from them.
- Teachers are often surprised at the insights children reveal as you ponder the complex meanings of fables, folktales, and other literature you have heard or read.
- When children tell stories you often reveal gifts and talents that have gone undiscovered with traditional approaches to learning.
- Storytelling offers many children an opportunity to develop skills and excel in oral expression, gaining respect that had not experienced before from peers.

adapted from *Speaking Out: Storytelling and Creative Drama for Children*, Jack Zipes (2004)

“Oral storytelling supports young children's learning and development differently than stories read aloud from picture books. It gives children an opportunity to exercise their imagination, communicate effectively, enhance their social literacy, and build community in a different way. Oral storytelling encourages a heightened and more sophisticated level of engagement among preschoolers through its invitation for role-playing and performance.”

Oral Storytelling: Building Community through Dialogue, Engagement, and Problem Solving, Berkowitz & Doriet (2011)

“Learning to tell stories also encourages the development of a range of voices, registers, accents and dialects which can be used to effect in the telling, and the acquisition of a body of knowledge about stories – their content, their ways of representing human beings and their lives, their organisation and sequencing.”

Howe and Johnson, *Common Bonds* (1992)

“In telling... one can shape the story to one's own needs, and while this may require the development of certain, perhaps buried skills, the advantages are great. In the first place, one can address one's audience directly: one can make eye contact or not as and when one chooses, use gesture and mime freely, expand or modify the form of one's telling as the occasion demands, and in general establish and maintain a community of attention between teller and listener.”

Morgan and Rinvulcri, *Once Upon A Time: Using Stories in the Language Classroom* (1983)

Engaging as a Storyteller

“The essential ingredients of successful storytelling are:

- interest in what you are describing and involvement in the story;*
- a detailed visual picture of the story’s events;*
- a desire that the listener should understand and share your feelings.” (p17)*

“Above all, you must believe in the value of telling stories to children, or the necessary preparation will be without heart or purpose.” (p18)

“The process of memorizing a story means very much more than just reading it through a short while before you are to tell it. In order to tell a story effectively the storyteller must:

- see it in her imagination*
- hear what the characters are saying, feel what they are feeling;*
- be prepared to spend time and energy on learning it.*

Practice and experience enable the storyteller to bring out the full potential of a story. Once it is absorbed in this way, it becomes a personal experience and a new creation every time you tell it. The very fact that it has not been learnt word for word, but has become a part of you, means that there is no necessity to use the same word every time. The storyteller is free, and so is the story.” (p59)

from **Storytelling, Eileen Colwell (Thimble Press, 1991)**

“People become storytellers by actually telling stories, not by being told how to tell them...”

Storytelling in Schools... and some Stories About It, Chris Powling (1997)

“We are all storytellers, if only we are given the chance.”

Harold Rosen, ‘Stories at Work’ from *By Word of Mouth* (1984)

Storytelling Support & Guidance

- If you are new to storytelling, begin by telling a short simple tale that you love and know well.
- Listen to yourself tell a story – be aware of the power of your voice varying pace, volume and tone.
- Don't be afraid of silence – let a pause build suspense or show the passage of time.
- Simple props, movement, facial expressions, gestures and body language will help focus the audience and might help structure the story.
- Repeated refrains, call and response or direct address to the audience so that they can respond to questions – will support structure and give you space to think
- Practice your story over and over; you don't need to know it word for word, but it's crucial that you know the key elements.
- If it makes you more comfortable, have a simple guide to hand – a storymap, story stones, - but don't be tempted to write out whole sentences – you'll end up reading it!

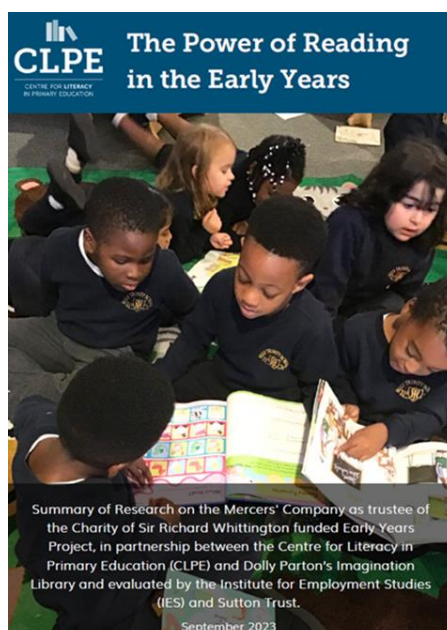
Active approaches to storytelling support children to engage independently in imaginative play and story-making and better understand narrative structures, characters and themes.

Key findings:

- A focus on stories and storytelling in the EYFS curriculum increases children's confidence and engagement in imaginative play throughout the setting.
- Children develop positive reading attitudes and are influenced to read independently if the teacher plans routine opportunities for children to read with and alongside peers and experienced readers within a reading community.
- Mapping out the bigger shapes of a story enables children to understand how different stories are structured.
- Revisiting and re-enacting a known story using drama allows children to develop empathy and increases detail and description in their retelling.

“Children had learnt whole stories in more depth and had a much greater understanding of the characters, emotions, and story language as opposed to having just learnt the story. They really understood it. Different things within the story stood out and were more poignant for different children and this was reflected in their subsequent story mapping and re-telling.” **Project Teacher**

Above extracts taken from the research findings of [The Power of Reading in the Early Years](#) - a Mercers funded Early Years Project, in partnership with CLPE and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and evaluated by the Institute of Employment Studies and Sutton Trust.



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Quality Text Choices – Progression Across the Primary School

Consider the breadth, range and quality of texts used as a source for storytelling and for broadening children's awareness of and work with traditional tales.

For example:

Traditional Tales in the Power of Reading



		Year 3		Year 4		Year 5		Year 6	
		Comments	Human Theme	Comments	Human Theme	Comments	Human Theme	Comments	Human Theme
		Library Focus	National Curriculum Cross-Curricular Links	Library Focus	National Curriculum Cross-Curricular Links	Library Focus	National Curriculum Cross-Curricular Links	Library Focus	National Curriculum Cross-Curricular Links
		Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies
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		Comments	Human Theme	Comments	Human Theme	Comments	Human Theme	Comments	Human Theme
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		Comments	Human Theme	Comments	Human Theme	Comments	Human Theme	Comments	Human Theme
		Library Focus	National Curriculum Cross-Curricular Links	Library Focus	National Curriculum Cross-Curricular Links	Library Focus	National Curriculum Cross-Curricular Links	Library Focus	National Curriculum Cross-Curricular Links
		Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies	Reading: Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Strategies
		Vocabulary, Grammar, Punctuation (and Spelling and Language)	Vocabulary, Grammar, Punctuation (and Spelling and Language)	Vocabulary, Grammar, Punctuation (and Spelling and Language)	Vocabulary, Grammar, Punctuation (and Spelling and Language)	Vocabulary, Grammar, Punctuation (and Spelling and Language)	Vocabulary, Grammar, Punctuation (and Spelling and Language)	Vocabulary, Grammar, Punctuation (and Spelling and Language)	Vocabulary, Grammar, Punctuation (and Spelling and Language)



A New Direction Evaluation

We'd be very grateful if you could spend a few moments completing an evaluation of the Storytelling Masterclass, if you haven't already done so. Use this QR code to access the document:

