

FRANCINE CHAÎNÉ

STORYTELLING AS A LEARNING TRIGGER IN EDUCATIONAL DRAMA

Storytelling is part of nearly everyone's experience since tender childhood. It is on the basis of this premise that we proposed, with a group of art education university students, to choose and interpret a story in order to present it to first-grade elementary students. It is by searching in their memory and recounting their personal memories that the university students started the activity and then engaged in the process of creation and interpretation of the tale for the elementary students. Through the use of questionnaires, journal reflections, and field notes, this article examines this experiment. In addition, the position of the organizer or the professor, who must create favourable conditions so that the activity progresses well (from the choice of the tale to the presentation in front of young children), will be explored.

Le conte fait partie de l'expérience de chacun depuis la tendre enfance. C'est en partant de cette prémisse que nous avons proposé à un groupe d'étudiants en éducation artistique à l'université de choisir et d'interpréter un conte à des élèves de première année. C'est en fouillant dans leur mémoire et en se remémorant leurs souvenirs personnels que ces étudiants ont amorcé cette activité et se sont engagés dans un processus de création et d'interprétation d'un conte. Un questionnaire, un journal de bord ainsi que des notes personnelles nous ont permis de faire l'analyse de cette expérience. De plus, nous avons étudié les conditions à mettre en place par l'animateur ou le professeur afin que l'activité se réalise de façon progressive (en partant du choix du conte jusqu'à la présentation devant des enfants).



Introduction: "Once Upon a Time"

"Once upon a time" is a well-known phrase that virtually always guarantees attention from children. Personally, what does it make you think of? Whom does it take you back to? Habitually, this phrase refers to emotionally charged childhood memories. Coincidentally, when children hear "Once upon a time," their attention is grabbed almost immediately. A moment of suspense is created, and most children become attentive to what is to come.

This succession of words could be considered like an open door into the world of make-believe, a world of dreams, of fabulous characters, of animals, etc. Storytelling, like every other work of art, as Cecily O'Neill says, "gives access to a self-contained imaginative universe, a dramatic 'elsewhere'" (45).

Through the art of storytelling a research project was developed for children between the ages of six and seven within the auspices of an Art Education university program. Twenty-five students who were signed up for a three-credit university class met the elementary children in order to tell them stories. The experiment was carried out in a primary school located in the same region as the Visual Arts Department of Laval University where I am currently teaching. More precisely, it is a working-class area of Quebec City in full cultural and artistic expansion. This project, from the initiation stage through development and right up to the presentations in class, helped me discover the power that storytelling had on everyone. As a privileged witness of this project, I was therefore able to observe how storytelling was not only a trigger for learning but also a tool to promote self-disclosure of the participants involved in this adventure.

This storytelling project started midway through the fall semester and ended with the presentation of tales in front of young children. The project extended over a period of six weeks during which there were weekly class presentations plus discussions and analysis of the material to encourage the progression of the creative work. The principle objectives of this experience for the university students was to 1) entertain a group of first-year primary school children by offering them one hour of storytelling, 2) offer the opportunity to discover local and international tales, 3) work in collaboration (in dyad), 4) integrate knowledge from the dramatic arts discipline (dramatic language, acting techniques, the world of theatricality, etc.), and 5) realize an artistic project intended for students in the same neighbourhood as the university.

Using the University Students' Childhood Experience as a Starting Point

The starting point of the project involved an exercise in sensory and affective memory purposefully used to draw out a story and its context from a childhood memory. This activity was rooted in the private lives of each student and was self-reflexive in nature. In other words, they tried to remember stories they had been told during their childhood. The activity enabled the participating university students to reminisce about a story from their child-

hood. This exercise also permitted them to retain certain aspects of storytelling they wished to preserve and ultimately develop in their own way. Thus, they became aware of what they wished to improve in their role as the storyteller: this character that “describes an on-going action” (Renoux 19; trans. by Chaîné). However, even though the exercise had an autobiographical component, a certain aesthetic distance was created by way of the storytelling itself. In this regard, Madeleine R. Grumet rightly affirms the notion of “fidelity rather than truth” (66). Grumet suggests that the academic context (dramatic and theatrical) does not require students to tell the whole truth; rather, it encourages them to remain true to themselves. To this we could add the fictional nature of the situation proposed by the drama context, for each individual has to play a character, i.e. that of the storyteller.

One aspect of the initiation of the storytelling experience raises the issue of the private and public spheres, or the intimate and the unknown. As it happens, the exercise for affective and sensorial memory makes each student plunge into his/her own inner world and into private and intimate histories. Subsequently, given that the activity takes place in a drama context combined with an improvisational situation, a rupture is created between the intimate nature of private memory and the sharing done in class. One element particularly caught our attention: the varying length of the students’ individual presentations. Interestingly, some were long and detailed, whereas others were remarkably short. At the same time, the sustained attention of his/her classmates seemed to provide support for each storyteller and created a receptive space that was favourable to each.

Consequently, the sensory and affective memory activity fostered the creation of an “autobiographical space” (Lejeune 41), to which a fictional dimension was added. Indeed, the situation enabled each student to speak about his/her own experience linked to a childhood memory and story. Yet given that the tale is recounted in public and in a drama class, the storyteller, as character, replaces the individual telling the story.

Creation: A Long and Winding Road

The process of creating the storytelling activity was worked out through discussion, short class presentations, and followed by commentary from everyone. This was purposefully done to enable the unfolding of the play. Furthermore, each student kept a personal reflective journal to note the details of the project’s evolution. All of this information allowed the students to retain the

significant points. It brought forth, from the storyteller's experience, a new level of comprehension about the pedagogy and potential of the arts.

The choice of story was decided in the beginning stages of the activity and had to meet certain criteria, which included, 1) the story should address girls and boys aged between six and seven, 2) it had to be an original story, and 3) it should last about ten minutes. Each week, the students were invited to present in class an extract of the story, so they could get a feel of the progression of their work. Through this hands-on approach, the students could concentrate on the progression of their work through the retroactive comments made by the professor and the class colleagues after the presentations. The dynamic interaction targeted aspects such as

- the choice of an evocative yet simple language,
- the overall logic and comprehension of the story,
- voice projection and the different voice intonations used according to the characters in the stories,
- facial expressions and the position of the storyteller's body within the presentation venue,
- visual contact with the spectators.

The students had to create their own characters as storytellers; therefore, they each had to imagine how it was that the storyteller came to know the story in question. For example, had he/she been a witness of one of the story's events? Had someone else told them the story? etc. Norah Morgan and Juliana Saxton sum it up like this: "Storytelling is not just giving factual information (a report) but should also involve elaboration so that it captures and sustains the interest of the listener" (114). Discovering the storyteller's point of view is one of the most important aspects of the art of storytelling and it allows the audience to believe in the story and maybe leads us to state, "Do you think it is a true story?" Yet, first and foremost, one essential quality of a good storyteller is the ability to communicate pleasure to young spectators (Renoux 32).

Besides the fact that the story had to be adapted according to the audience's age, it was also important that the content be told simply and clearly: The characters, the places and time of the story, the developing situations presented in a series of flashbacks and flash forwards, etc., had to be kept uncomplicated. To these criteria, the story also had to avoid any Disney similarities, since they were too sickly-sweet, according to the students. Furthermore, the focus had to concern the interpretation of the story rather than its accessories (costumes or scenery). Lastly, the story had to be told from the storyteller's point of view, although it would have been possible

to let some of the characters from the story talk now and again. Certain adaptations were required to correspond to the project's intentions, for example: 1) modification of the duration of the storytelling session: shorten or lengthen, 2) addition of dialogues to make the tale more dynamic, 3) avoiding the use of visual elements (illustrations, objects, costume elements, etc.), and 4) collaboration between the storytellers, etc.

From the recollection of having listened to stories when they were young and from the weekly class presentations, the students discovered the following to assure a successful performance:

The students listed key storytelling elements such as,

- The discovery of magical objects: for example, if we think of the magical new clothing worn by the betrayed king. It was in fact denounced out loud by a child witnessing that the king was parading the city in the nude.
- The introduction of new characters: the sky god's arrival on an island while he listened to the sun and the moon's disputes.
- Key moments of the story: sudden turn around and chance encounters. One story began with the event of a large man who was in a hurry losing a mitten in the frozen snow. What will happen to this mitten?
- The incorporation of expressions or set phrases for one or more of the characters. For example: "Gold fish, lovely little goldfish, turn your head and look at me straight in the eyes."
- Maintaining eye contact with the children. Looking straight into the group while giving particular attention to each spectator to convince them that the story is being told especially for them.

The university students at first came to these particular conclusions based on the commentaries offered by the class spectators (the class colleagues and the professor) and from the notes they had each inscribed in their reflective journal during the development of the story. With this in mind, the elaboration of the story brought about a reflexive "in the midst of the action and about the action" (Schön 170; trans. by Chaîné) on the part of the participants who had encouraged the progression of their work in view of a greater adaptation to the young audience.

What the Project Demonstrated and What Students Learned From the Experience

The artistic context of the creative process of story creation led the Art Education students to tell their own story. Just as O'Neill

alluded to theatre and drama, we can say that storytelling “depend[s] on the temporary acceptance of an illusion—a closed, conventional, and imaginary world that exists in the voluntary conspiracy between audience and actors” (45). The suspended time of the story allows everyone to enter an imaginary world.

From the beginning, the experience led me to confirm my intuition, that even if the students were beginners in the dramatic arts, a presentation in front of a young audience would offer a greater integration of the know-how and techniques of the discipline. Most importantly, I had to have complete confidence in the students so as to emphasize the importance of the creative process and not just in the presentation itself. The fact that the objective was a real presentation in a primary school allowed the students to elaborate their stories with greater attention and meticulousness. Only two participants manifested a lack of time to realize the project. Finally, as the facilitator of this class, I had the option of cancelling the presentations in case of difficulties. The students and I had to scramble to find solutions when confronted with problems during rehearsals. Yet, being faced with the objective of a real presentation forced us to find solutions actively.

At the end of term, I sent a questionnaire to the students. Ten out of twenty-five students completed the questionnaire for an average response rate of 40%. For the majority (80%), it was their first drama class in an area of study where there are five compulsory courses in dramatic arts to obtain their teaching degree. Most were in their first term of their degree, while the other 20% were in their second year. However,

- The majority of the students (80%) had already told stories to children as babysitters and 20% had also been involved in storytelling during teaching practice.
- The students learned the following from their drama experience: meeting with children; the power of storytelling with no frills “even without costumes, we still had an impact,” wrote one of them; discovering dramatic art: “it’s not just theatre, it’s also learning to express oneself, to lead a group” or “dramatic art comes to me naturally and spontaneously.” Also, the experience of storytelling permitted the students create closer bonds with the young audience by way of choosing a vocabulary that is adapted to them and by answering the questions of the audience without ever losing the momentum of the story itself. The students, furthermore, recognized the soothing effect that storytelling had on the children.

- The storytelling experience also taught them something about themselves as humans: discovering play: “I like to play” and “I am a good storyteller”; self-esteem: “I can do a lot more than I thought I could” and “I can make a story come to life”; self-awareness: “I communicate a lot through my body language” and “I can make a story come to life.”
- Finally, as future art teachers, the storytelling experience created the desire to do the experience again and to integrate storytelling into their teaching: “I would like to use storytelling to make up stories and to do the drawings afterwards”; confirmed career choices: “I already had teaching practice experience, the activity confirmed my choices”; awareness of discipline: “discipline is still relevant.”

Those are just some of the learning points acquired through storytelling that the students discovered from the experience according to their level of involvement. They were in a position where they realized they needed to be totally committed. In fact, the project was not an ivory-tower exercise, but fully integrated in a social setting, that of the primary school in the local area. It is also worth saying that the university students took their child-audience just as seriously as any other audience. This is where I noticed a respect for the spectators. After all, this audience could well later be the one that they will meet during their teaching practice and during their professional life as specialized teachers of art.

Conclusion

This experience in storytelling for children has allowed me as a university professor to question myself on the matter of teaching art and particularly drama. As Paulo Freire suggests, I learned as much about storytelling as my students including the pleasures of offering a magical moment to children: “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (59). In this interaction where a dialogue exists between students and teacher, it is obvious that one learns from the other. I often said to my students that I consider the classroom like a laboratory, and, so, everyone had to be involved in the creative work that took shape over the weeks. Needless to say, I do not deny my role as a teacher to escape my responsibilities. On the contrary, my teaching is constructed through interactions. Lessons, although carefully prepared, can still alter their course without losing sight of the project in which everyone is involved. In

this case, the project was an event of storytelling to children a few weeks before the Christmas holidays 2004.

This interaction between the students and the teacher, with storytelling as a form of mediation, has taught me about the possible involvement in a practical project downtown. What I learned in observing them in action with the children and the comments that I wrote on their work was focused on the following aspects:

- Stage presence: good contact with the children;
- The lack of confidence of one team that caused them to read their original story, even though it had been memorized in class beforehand;
- Voice: how their work on voice training progressed over the weeks;
- Companionship between the members of each team (two or three players): the ability to listen and pay attention to others, as well as sharing the role of the storyteller;
- The relationship with space: that of the storyteller and of the audience;
- Adjustments to the story which would have to be made longer or shorter, depending on the individual case.

The children, according to their teachers, greatly appreciated the stories and, from time to time, went to the local library to hear more. Their enthusiastic reactions led us to believe that the students' stories had enchanted them.

Integrating drama, such as what was proposed to this group of students, reminds us of the importance of the interactions among participants, as it often awakens and fosters confidence, without forfeiting the sense of play and individual effort among them. Both teacher and student share in the risks involved in creative activity. No one can know in advance if the creative work will take shape or which direction it will take. At first, in this local school storytelling project I did not know to what extent the students would get involved. Nor did I know the nature of the learning at the professional, personal, and artistic levels. This storytelling project will certainly be continued, but how? That will depend on the group itself and the ideas that come forward. Possibly, the next storytelling project will be no more than a starting point for a drama workshop, an art project, storybook creation by children, etc. The enjoyment will be shared by the students, myself, and, lastly, the children listening to the stories. ❁

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