2001 FAAPI Conference

Dramatizing Stories and Poems
*(the abstract)*

Workshop Coach: Alfred S. Hopkins

The technique of dramatizing stories and poems opens up a vast array of potential learning experiences, taking us beyond the mere mastery of structure and content. When we tell stories or bring poems to life (*revitalizing the practices of our forefathers*) we establish deeper “connections” with images and emotions and “appropriate” them, thus sparking enriching work on diction, idiomatic expressions, accents, and the secrets of style. Study teams will be formed to investigate these techniques.

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Dramatizing Stories and Poems
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Men and women have been telling stories and chanting songs and poems since language and memory gave them the ability to share their experiences. The mass media, internet and other exciting modern developments have certainly cast a shadow on Grandpa’s tales and Aunt Betsy’s verses; yet dramatizing stories or poems in the classroom can be an invaluable tool for language learning.

What minstrels, troubadours, jugglers, story-tellers...court poets, and who knows how many other “species” had in common was their love for language and their ability to embellish it. Stories and poems well told have discernible structures built with rhythm, flow, vivid imagery, change of tempo...denouement. A trained narrator can capture our attention with the timbre of his voice, spark our imagination and bring about an oniric feeling that frees us, allowing us to “see,” “feel” “associate” or “recreate” the characters, conflicts and events described.

*When the student dramatizes he comprehends the story on a deeper level: the author’s words and phrases become his own.*
We have all taken tests on the content and meaning of “The Raven” or “The Old Man and the Sea.” We have studied the vocabulary, the verb tenses, idiomatic expressions, discussed the author’s style. Less common is the use of dramatization. Students—and teachers—tend to be excessively concerned with correct pronunciation or the interpretation of content, as if there were only one correct way to tell the story, only one way to recite the poem. We hear that droning voice inch forward endlessly worrying about accepted tones, pitches and accents, nearly out of breath...and we begin to wiggle on our benches.

What if we were to dramatize the stories or poems? Drama is a Greek word meaning “the thing done,” an action seen in the movement of the body, the tension of the voice, the flow of emotion. Some refer to this as “narrative technique;” I prefer to call it “dramatizing”, taking the story or the poem off the pages and molding it with the flesh and blood of the speaker. This demands training and good voice technique. It therefore provides an excellent opportunity to work on diction; the story-tellers bring the author’s words to life imbuing them with their own thoughts, feelings and experiences. In the process words which were others become their own.

How do we deal with dialogue? Characters? The narrator? Struggling with these and other difficulties leads to work on description, reported speech, verb tenses, accent, the secrets of composition, and... the intuitive magic of the language.

For its part, poetry’s expressive freedom liberates creative energy and the vast play potential of words. “Once upon a midnight dreary” or “a rose is a rose is a rose” are effective image provokers only if the dramatizer as well as the listener are led to see, or touch that red rose or feel the heaviness of night.

During the practical drills we will divide up into teams to explore dramatizing techniques in flesh and blood, using known stories and poems or our own inventions.

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**“Dramatizing Stories and Poems”**  
*(The Paper)*

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Some practical hints concerning how to use stories and poems with imagination and creativity in the classroom to enhance language learning, stimulate individual growth and increase appreciation for the subtleties of the English language.

"The question is not what you look at but what you see."  
(Thoreau)

"As I write I create myself again and again."  
(Joy Harjo)

"...Poetry arrived in search of me. I don’t know, I don’t know where it came from, from winter or a river. I don’t know how or when..."  
(Pablo Neruda)

"Theater is a lie; make it as true as possible."  
(Voltaire)

"A character is the organic union between the life of the character and that of the actor. An actor must absorb the life of his character."  
(Eugene Vakhtangov)

"What is marvellous certainly causes pleasure, as can be deduced from the fact that we all tell a story adding something of our own in the belief that by so doing we entertain many of our listeners."  
(Aristotle)

“When I was first learning to read, but not always behaving appropriately, my father introduced me to the fables of Aesop in the hope that these ancient cautionary tales might improve my deportment...As I stared at these texts and their handsome color illustrations, struggling to find my interpretations, I slowly came to realize that stories mean much more than words and pretty pictures.”  
(Robert McKee)

“To dare to tell a story is to decide the establishment of an order responding only to the narrator, that is, to the faithfulness of his experience and of his memory.”  
(Fernando Savater)

“The voice is the soul’s muscle,”  
(Alfred Wolfsohn)

“The soul cannot bear to be separated from its body because it is the body that allows the soul to feel.”  
(Leonardo da Vinci)
we feel in re-telling a marvellous experience? Yet there is a subjective underbelly that leads us to improvise, invent and attempt to entertain as we weave our tale, alert to the dangers which await us at every turn, nick and cranny. This subjectivity exists thanks to the individuality of each human being: story-tellers are men and women clearly different in the tastes, feelings, and thoughts; each has lived a unique life filled with unrepeatable experiences and contrasting perceptions of reality.

McKee, a Hollywood screen writer, points out another significant aspect of the story-teller’s task: the need to go beyond words. The written word is the starting point but as we shall later see, words go through a transformation when spoken by living beings. Thus, the spoken word often produces an effect in sharp contrast to the text itself. Every actor knows that reading Shakespeare can be a stimulating literary experience; acting his plays, entering the skin of his characters, saying “out, out brief candle,” is quite different yet no less provocative.

The statements by Leonardo da Vinci, Seneca and Wolfsohn suggest the total compromise of voice, body and soul in the telling of a story. Painters know that the body—its form, color, weight, movement and contour—is a rich language of and by itself. A speaker who hides his feelings or those of the characters in his story comes across to his audience as dishonest and thus impedes the belief needed to establish an empathic rapport between listener and story-teller. A clear voice without “soul,” likewise, is like a tree without roots. Each story-teller may have a different style, but each must tell the story with his or her entire being. That supposes the “taming” and “domination” of his basic instrument, his body. The story-teller’s body should be thought of as an “instrument” to be directed as symphony conductors direct their musicians, seeking the desired effects.

In the Beginnning was the Word

Men and women have been telling stories andchanting songs and poems since language and memory gave them the ability to communicate their experiences and feelings to others. The union of language with memory made it possible for our ancient ancestors to talk about their experiences. We might conjecture that the ability to communicate, in its most primitive state, reduced to the crude necessities of existence. Yet there are very early records of the poetic use of language, indicating that pre-historic men also were enthralled by the magic of words. More than a thousand years before Christ an Egyptian poet wrote or caused to be written characters on papyrus which, according to Ezra Pound’s translation, read:

“The swallow sings ‘Dawn, Whither fadeth the dawn?’
So fades my happy night

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My love in bed beside me."
The author of those lines, whether male or female, no doubt expressed a true feeling, as true as a modern day schoolgirl who wrote the following verse:

“I’m a poem that flies through the sky
I’m love and truth,
Happy and sad
Three dreams,
Porcelain and fragile
in the night.”

Imagine a world without computers, without books, without paper; men and women speaking a language filled with pauses, stops, beats, throaty sounds, clear ringing vowels, vibrations, shrill pitches, whispers, grunts; accompanied by body movements, mimicking, gestures, winks, smiles, loud guffaws; and an attentive audience listening, clapping, applauding, disapproving, reflecting, challenging, dancing, chanting and re-living the narrated experience. Think of your past, the cultural heritage of your society, and think of the many bridges that link past to present.

Words are born as are embryos in the struggle to become, to become flesh, to emerge as meaningful sequences which can then be transmitted to other human beings, whose bodies and organs “interpret” them. Thus the word is the inseparable companion of the body; the body is the lifetime mate of the voice and the question, command, thought, feeling, report, chronicle or story we tell is the result of a highly synchronized meshing of our whole being.

Human beings are different from animals in at least one important aspect: they can remember and re-tell their experiences: “In the beginning was the word and the word became flesh” is a biblical expression which testifies to the astonishment men and women feel when faced with their words. Our lips, tongues and teeth—aided by our breath and resonators—produce vowels, consonants, sounds, words, sentences...descriptions, chronicles, narrations...and these sequences of intention in turn cause our listeners to think, feel or act. When we weave words into sentences or into stories we do so by varying the tone, volume, pitch or “depth” of our voices in accordance with the language we speak and the cultural group or social class to which we belong. We also do so with the gestures, physical tensions, ticks, lipsing, grammatical or pronunciation errors, stuttering or facial masks of our own “psychic universe.”

It is clear that the creative use of language has accompanied men and women not only in their every day struggle for survival, but likewise in their endeavors to come to terms with nature, the universe and the contradictions of existence. Language is the result of human contact, social conflict, the flow and mingling of human beings in love, at war, in crisis and in quest of betterment. Literature, in its written and spoken forms, reveals the unending
struggle of men and women to grasp the significance of life in its vastness and in its concreteness. In chants, songs, poems and stories men and women of all ages have attempted to express and their fears, loves, hates, passions, reflections, and flights of imagination so as to momentarily transcend the mundane.

Human beings communicate in a subjective way, although certain circumstances require them to be as objective as possible. No two persons can ever report the same event in identical fashion, even though they use the same words to do so. We expect and demand that newspapers and magazines give us an “objective” account of the day’s events, yet we know that there are clear limits to the concept of objectivity. There is an inevitable and continuous process of interpretation. This is also the case of story-tellers. We should bear our subjectivity in mind. Nevertheless, the ethics of a story-teller obliges him or her to harness subjectivity to objectivity. We have no right legally or morally to destroy the tale we tell. Rather, we should respect the author’s intention, meshing it with our own understanding of the plot and the characters we bring to life.

Language, an Art

No solid understanding of a language can be obtained without delving into and comprehending the urgency of language and its intrinsically artistic drive, common to all men and women in all walks of life. The man on the street uses colorful speech, images, idiomatic expressions, metaphors, alliteration, rhyme, rhythm and many other components of poems, songs and stories. To verify this it would be sufficient to go to a protest march, a soccer game or listen to salesmen barter their goods, overhear people’s complaints, their quarrels, how they bring to life their experiences, their successes and failures in love or in the mainstream of life. We do not mean to say that the man on the street is an artist, but he does provide a rich reservoir of the raw material for the artistic expression of writers, poets and composers.

If art involves striving for perfection, it should be pointed out that the beauty of the spoken word—in poetry, song, story or on stage—depends on the truthfulness and the boldness of its expression, on its ability to evoke and provoke. Yet, lovely words are not enough. A person’s pronunciation may be impeccable according to standard usage, yet her voice may grate upon the ear; or she may pronounce with obvious defects yet produce such deep undertones and rich resonance that we momentarily forget her faulty diction. Human communication goes beyond a codified measuring stick of what is proper or improper.

The Body: The Instrument
In dealing with poems and stories one of the first tasks is to rid ourselves of rigid clichés inherited from parents, friends, teachers or the exaggerated subjection to tradition. The whole human being is involved in the act of speaking—although we commonly repress aspects of our body expression due to shame, fear of disapproval or other inhibiting mechanisms. When we “connect” as readers to a poem or tale vibrations shoot throughout our whole body. Who has not been moved—that’s the precise expression we use in English—by a song, a poem, or a story? The potential emotional effect is even stronger when we say the words. When John says “Once upon a midnight dreary,” (Edgar Allan Poe) or “Every evening the young Fisherman went out upon the sea” (Oscar Wilde) he must inhale through his nose and allow the air to go to the lungs and be pushed out by the diaphragm, pass through the quivering vocal foils, bounce against the palate and slither over the tongue and teeth past the lips. The speaker’s own breath opens up access to one’s own “midnight dreary” or the smell of the salty sea. Deep and trained breathing activates memories and sets off vibrations that affect not only those organs but our whole being, as do voice tones, gestures, body movement and tension. Consider a child’s gyrations on asking for or being given a candy bar. The child speaks not only with words, but with his whole body. We later learn to “tame” our bodies, yet under control or not our physical selves reveal our feelings and our social condition. As story-tellers, therefore, we must use free the expressive potential of both voice and body.

Dramatization and the Art of Story-telling

Dramatization supposes a more complete compromise than that we assume in reading or reciting. In some circles, strong differentiation is made between what is dramatization and what is narration. We prefer to use the term dramatization to give a more ample spectrum of possibilities to the performers. It should be pointed out, however, that there are a few “technical” differences. The story-teller usually maintains a more direct and frank relationship with his or her audience. He tends to weave in and out as narrator or character, while the actor limits himself to the “fourth wall” that encircles his magical world. Likewise, a story-teller may use few or no props at all whereas actors usually need stage objects.

At this point we must distinguish between the “academic” content of a story or a poem (what does it mean? What is the plot? Is rhyme or alliteration used?) and their creative reproduction. Although academic understanding is unquestionably important, we would like to concentrate on the ability to go beyond the commonplace to provoke an active recreation of the stories or poems. To “dramatize” in this sense does not mean to seek the “tragic.” Drama comes from the Greek and means “the thing done,” that is, it supposes action. We could say that ideas and sentiments are expressed by the flow of movement, and become visible in gestures, or audible in music and words.
Sometimes this movement is exterior—as when Othelo grabs a non-existent knife—while at other times it is internal: a young woman gazing out the window and re-living her first experience with sex.

Although anyone can tell a story, doing so well supposes a technique and a routine of training. Story-tellers must develop fine cat-like muscles, learn to concentrate, to “actively” relax, to regulate his energy, project his voice without losing the truthfulness of his emotion, learn to separate his or her own nervousness from the attitudes of his characters, fill silences with invisible actions, adapt his own rhythm to that of the story he is telling, see, hear and imagine far away places or live through experiences he or she knows nothing about. Experienced story-tellers therefore do daily drills and accumulate a vast array of body movements and vocal tones into their “repertoire.” They must read continually, practice re-telling stories and experiences, Continual work on body and voice in all of its potential and drills involving the daily use of observation and imagination are the tools of his trade.

Although we are here mainly concerned with story-telling, it is important to point out the power of poetic expression. Not infrequently the dividing line between prose and poetry becomes ambiguous. In dealing with poetry, the dramatizer must become a sort of poet. The power of poetry derives from its intimate and non-conformist access to feelings. Poetry leaves an intimate zone of the poet to enter an intimate zone of the reader, who might very well exclaim: “this sounds as if I wrote it!” Writing and reading poems is very much like a breathing exercise. If this sounds like yoga, you are probably right. Inhaling deeply not only brings oxygen, but also images, memories, flashes, sounds and a myriad of other provocative sensations to the innermost parts of our body, bits and pieces of past and present which our more “rational” being has filed away temporarily.

What is a Story?

Who can define the precise characteristics of a story? That certainly is not an easy task, in view of the diversity of opinions on the subject. Nevertheless, we might mention some keys. We could think of it as an adventurous trip: we get ready, pack, catch the bus, something happens along the way, and when we least expect it some unplanned event occurs. Stories are meant to be read or told at one sitting. Their brevity suggests that there is an attempt to respond to an urgent demand, to compress the world into a point of focus and to concentrate on a series of events characterized by unity of action. The characters in a story lack the development of those in a novel, yet they struggle to resolve their intrigues. We are presented with a situation, it is developed, there is a turning point followed by the denouement, not infrequently in an unexpected way. Edgar Allan Poe, one of the fathers of the
modern short-story, feels that tales must be brief enough to concentrate only on what is most significant, obey a basic unity from beginning to end, and events must occur with an intensity seeking an aesthetic effect—although the events themselves may not be so intense. What gives them intensity is how they are dealt with.

The narrator is a sort of master-of-ceremonies. Her role is to take the action to its inevitable conclusion, stepping away from or entering the action as she sees fit. She is omnipresent, knows more about the plot and the characters than anyone else, yet may come and goes at will; though her role is to be objective she must not reveal secrets beforehand; she may be protagonist, as in stories told in the first person; she may be a witness to the action. The story-teller may need to clearly differentiate the narrator from the characters in the story, through changes of voice, gestures, use of space or physical movement.

The listener demands to know how the situation will be resolved, and is kept in a state of tension by the flow, rhythm, pauses, silences, the peaks and the valleys. Sometimes the movement of the story is manifested through exterior actions—Little Red Ridinghood picking flowers—while at other moments it may be expressed as an inward struggle—Deidre staring out upon the snow and dreaming. It is crucial to comprehend the very particular flow of each story, above and beyond the conflict and the struggle of the characters themselves. Until we find the speed and rhythm of that flow we seem to be sailing upstream and against the wind.

A Few Pointers:

1) Read through the story several times until you discover its structure, its style, its mood. Once we find its structure, it can begin to “tell itself.” What are the action sequences? Who are the characters and what are their relationships? Where does the story take place? What is the turning point? How can the denouement best be dealt with?

2) Images and sensorial messages. Until these come to life, the story remains cold and academic. The story-teller must search his own life, observe people, nature, his own past, objects which surround him, until he find correspondences with those in the story. What effect do certain sounds produce on our character? Smells? What are the voices of the characters like, that of the narrator, and how can we “paint” images with our voices?

3) What is the rhythm, speed, the pace? It is convenient to read and tell the story at ever changing speeds until we find the most adequate for our tale. At bullet speed, as in slow motion, at high pitched or low pitched voice, singing, chanting, whispering, laughing, crying, exaggerating pauses and silences, giving ample time to absorb images or letting them flow like stormy clouds.
4) The speaker-audience relationship. The narrator needs frank eye contact with her audience, yet must also enhance the “magical space” surrounding her. Be careful not to “hide” from the audience. Remember that what the story-teller “sees” or “hears” the audience will also “see” and “hear”.

5) The dramatizer may use objects and costumes or...nothing but her own body. However, those objects or costumes used must bear a clear significance to the action. No objects should be used for mere decorative purposes.

6) All of the speaker's gestures, movements and actions should be those of the narrator or the characters she is describing. They should NEVER be her own ticks. The viewer always supposes the story teller moves, screams or laughs for a purpose.

7) Creating stories and poems. Verbal and physical games are very useful for stimulating creativity. We will only mention a few. The teacher should invent his or her own. In a game of tag the boy or girl who is “it” must tell the story until he tags someone else. The same can be done with musical chairs. One person or group does a sequence of actions, initially at random, while others put words to the actions. In working with poetry there is much more freedom in terms of form. Once this is understood it becomes a stimulus for production. The teacher can ask the students to make “word pools,” or “word albums” which then can be drawn upon to make poems as if they were cross-word puzzles. Beating or clapping with the hands while inventing “rap” verses. Rhyme and alliteration games, though apparently difficult due to lack of vocabulary, may end up greatly enriching word power. Feeling or smelling objects, listening to strange sounds...and stream of consciousness speed writing or vocal composition (once you begin writing or speaking, you may never stop until you’ve ended) are but a few of the many drills that teachers may use to stimulate creative writing habits. More often than not the students themselves will provide the teacher with abundant game material for putting the imagination into action.

We have merely touched on the vast potential represented by story-telling. The practical applications, drills and routine exercises will provide an unending flow of material for investigation. In the process teachers will learn as much from students as students from teachers; story-tellers as much from their audiences as audiences from story-tellers. This flow of energy is guaranteed once the story-teller-teacher compromises herself with passion, conviction and truthfulness in her dramatizing adventure.

References:
Note: Most of the views and information provided in this paper are based on the author’s own experience teaching, acting and story-telling. However, we would like to mention a few sources of reference.


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