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Extending a sense of story through retelling experiences in a unit on historical fiction

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Extending a sense of story through retelling experiences in a unit on historical fiction

Abstract

Literacy can be defined as the ability to make use of all available possibilities of written language to create meaning (Smith, 1983). With this definition in mind, a teacher finds support in developing a learning environment in which children can encounter a whole array of opportunities to extend their reading and writing abilities. A nurturing environment allows children to bring their experiences to reading and writing in order to engage in predicting and risk taking which is what comprehension and composition of written materials is all about. Then they can acquire basic insights into written language: Print needs to be meaningful, and written language is different from speech (Smith, 1983). Children can develop language abilities to comprehend written material through a variety of experiences such as dramatization, storytelling, poetry, reciting/reading and reading fiction and nonfiction.

EXTENDING A SENSE OF STORY THROUGH RETELLING EXPERIENCES IN
A UNIT ON HISTORICAL FICTION

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Wendy Snitker
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Literacy can be defined as the ability to make use of all available possibilities of written language to create meaning (Smith, 1983). With this definition in mind, a teacher finds support in developing a learning environment in which children can encounter a whole array of opportunities to extend their reading and writing abilities. A nurturing environment allows children to bring their experiences to reading and writing in order to engage in predicting and risktaking which is what comprehension and composition of written materials is all about. Then they can acquire basic insights into written language: Print needs to be meaningful, and written language is different from speech (Smith, 1983). Children can develop language abilities to comprehend written material through a variety of experiences such as dramatization, storytelling, poetry, reciting/reading and reading fiction and nonfiction.

In order to create meaning through experiences with written language, Goodman (1986) emphasizes the importance of involvement with whole units rather than fragments. As in the case of learning to speak, children do not need units of language provided in bits and pieces in learning to read and write. Amazingly, children can learn language when they need it to express themselves or to understand others, especially when the people around them are using language with the purpose of creating meaning.

To nurture children's comprehension abilities, the value of story retelling will be explored. By extending the literature base of the basal reader series, particularly the section focusing on the genre of historical fiction, an instructional project for students in grade six will be developed to foster children's sense of story through expressive language activity.

VALUE OF RETELLING WHOLE UNITS OF MEANING TO EXTEND COMPREHENSION ABILITIES

Simple retelling adds to children's enjoyment of a story and provides opportunities for them to extend their sense of story by experiencing the story as a whole unit, following a sequence of ideas, and becoming aware of such elements as plot pattern, characterization, theme, and style of the author (Harms/Lettow, unpublished).

Fostering Story Schema

Encouraging children to develop and use their sense of story, or schema, for retelling helps them learn what to expect in a story and how to decide what is important to remember (McConaughly, 1980; Saden, 1982; Whaley, 1981a). Studies suggest a student's age, prior knowledge, and understanding of particular grammatical constructions, along with a concept of story will influence their ability to communicate through storytelling. A concept of story can help the student predict and process stories (Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1975; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Thorndyke, 1977; Whaley, 1981).

For some time, the key role of prior knowledge of content in reading comprehension has been recognized. Recent studies indicate that prior knowledge of story structure also is a factor in children's successful interpretation and construction of stories.

Mandler and Johnson (1977) describe a story schema as a reader's set of expectations about the internal structure of stories that makes both comprehension and recall more efficient. This schema consists of a general framework that includes a hierarchical ordering of story elements with basic components related causally or temporally. The development of a schema assists the reader in attending to certain aspects of the incoming material while keeping track of what has gone on before. The schema lets the reader know when a part of the story is complete and can be stored in memory, or whether the information should be held until more is added (Rand, 1984). Story schema also plays an important part in retrieval. To order recall, the reader follows the familiar framework of typical stories. The more a story conforms to an ideal structure, the better the recall (Mandler, 1978).

Understanding Story Grammar

Although "story structure, or grammar" and "story schema" coincide with each other, the two are not the same when discussing retelling. Story grammar is "a rule system devised for the

purpose of describing the regularities found in one kind of text" (Mandler, 1977). It is the parts that make up a well-formed story, the way they are arranged, and relationships among them (Lehr, 1984).

Considering the importance of story schemata in children's emerging comprehension abilities does not mandate the teaching of rules directly, but focuses teachers' attention on how children process stories. Having students retell stories highlights story structure and provides teachers a diagnostic teaching strategy for understanding their language knowledge (Rand, 1984). Through miscue analysis, using readers' retellings of what they have read, teachers can find what is involved in readers' comprehension of literature (Goodman, 1982).

Applebee (1978) and Glenn (1979) discovered that preschoolers and five-year-olds were acquainted with basic story structure and had developed a sense of story. Whaley (1981) worked with third, sixth, and eleventh graders and found they used a set of rules in anticipating particular structural elements and sequences of elements. She then constructed activities to enhance children's knowledge of story structure.

In the past, there has been some controversy concerning the value in teaching story grammar to improve comprehension ability. Dreher and Singer (1980) found that the teaching of story grammar made no difference in the retellings of intermediate

grade students. However, Dewitz and Tackett (1981) found that some students' comprehension had improved through story retelling activity (Marshall, 1983).

VALUE OF QUALITY LITERATURE AND STORY RETELLING

Well-informed stories have structures that include a setting (time, place, and characters), a theme (a beginning event that causes the main character to react and form a goal or face a problem), plot episodes (events in which the main character attempts to attain the goal or solve the problem), and a resolution (the attainment of the goal or solution of the problem and the ending, which may have long-term consequences) (Morrow, 1985).

With this in mind, story grammar is an excellent basis for evaluating student comprehension. Students' growth in sense of story can be assessed through consideration of their inclusion of story grammar aspects in their retellings. A checklist of story grammar elements can be designed so that teachers can record students' performances, while observing story retelling. These elements are plot pattern, characterization, theme, and style of the author.

Providing Historical Fiction as Means of Fostering

Person-Social Development

Well-written historical fiction offers young people the vicarious experience of participating in the life of the past

and appreciating their heritage. It encourages children to think as well as to feel. Today's way of life is a result of what people did in the past, and the present will influence the way people live in the future. Historical fiction enables children to see the interdependence of humankind. Stories of the past will help children comprehend that times change; nations do rise and fall, but the universal needs of humankind have remained relatively unchanged. All people need and want respect, belonging, love, freedom and security, regardless of whether they lived during the period of the Vikings, the pioneers, or are alive today (Huck, 1987).

Retelling Stories Through Many Modes of Expression

A wide array of retelling activities based on historical fiction works can be done through speaking, writing, dramatizing, and expressing through the graphic arts.

Speaking

Retelling can be done in a variety of interesting ways.

Feltboard stories. Young children and children with special needs can be assisted in a concrete way to retell stories by arranging illustrated pelfon pieces representative of important characters, objects, and aspects of the setting on a feltboard. Through ordering these pieces, children can focus on characterization, the events of the story, the setting, the parts of the story, and the total movement of the story.

Examples of historical fiction stories or parts of these stories that can be used with feltboard are Matchlock Gun (Edmonds), Bread and Butter Indian (Clover), and Dakota Dugout (Turner).

Monologues. Older children can center on an interesting character and retell the story from the point of view of that character. Examples of stories suitable for this activity are The Ice Trail (Crompton), Island of the Blue Dolphins (O'Dell), and Sign of the Beaver (Speare).

Group storytelling. This experience can assist children in understanding different plot structures and how the parts relate to the whole. The repetition in retelling the conflict in these plots can lead children to consider the theme more fully. It is through storytelling that the more mature readers can explore the elements as they relate to the whole work. Examples of stories suitable for this activity are Caddie Woodlawn (Brink) and the Little House Series (Wilder).

Dialogues. Children, with the guidance of a teacher, can transfer a story into a dialogue that can be extended to relate feelings, thoughts, body movements, and descriptions of setting in speech. Dialogues can assist children in understanding a story's action initiated by the characters, the resolve of the conflict, and different plot structures.

Sound effects. Identifying the sound imagery and adding it to the retelling can extend the story's meaning. Children can

tape sounds they have produced or sounds from recordings to play with their retelling, or they can tape the whole experience to play for their audience. Examples of stories with sound imagery are Sounder (Armstrong), and Robinson Crusoe (Defoe).

Book talks. Children can focus on the totality of a book by relating the essential elements. The individual or group of children who make the presentation can learn to determine how extensive their retelling should be. If too little is told, the audience will not become motivated to read the book; if too much is told, they will not feel the need to read it.

Writing

Stories can be retold in writing as well as in speaking to extend children's sense of story.

Rebus stories. The visual aspects of a story can be depicted in a rewritten account centering on characters, objects, experiences, and settings.

Letters from characters. In preparing such letters, children need to focus on the qualities of the character and how the character would respond to an experience. A letter or a series of letters can be dated before, during, or after the time period covered in the book thus bringing attention to the setting. Children can assume the identity of various characters in a work and correspond with each other. Examples are Sarah, Plain and Tall (MacLachlan) and Matchlock Gun (Edmonds).

Newspaper accounts. An experience from a story can be retold through the form of a news article. Accounts of interviews with characters is also another possibility.

Riddles. Composing riddles can help students identify memorable events and a character's important qualities.

Time lines. The movement of time in a book can be illustrated with a time line relating changes in setting and the actions of the characters.

Acting

Several drama activities can be part of the story retelling process.

Dramatizations. Stories can be retold through dramatization involving the characters' dialogue and body actions to develop and resolve the conflict. This activity can lead to a discussion of the theme and also the parts of the story.

Costumes and parades. Children can study a character and can compile a costume. If several children develop costumes, they can have a story parade.

Narrative pantomime. The actions created through the characters' responses to experiences can be retold through bodily movement as a leader retells or rereads the story.

Art

Many art activities can be a part of story retelling.

Drawing. The illustration of a favorite part or the most important part of the story can facilitate children's

consideration of the characters, setting, conflict and its resolve, and the underlying message (theme). These illustrations can be used to support the oral or written retelling of a story.

Book design. In retelling a story through writing, students may wish to extend the text by including an illuminated letter at the beginning of the account or on each page or pagespread.

Group illustrating. Children can engage in group illustrating of a story by identifying the major sections and each child illustrating a section. Discussion of the important story elements can lead to a more in-depth understanding of the story. Examples suitable for this activity are Sign of the Beaver (Speare), Island of the Blue Dolphins (O'Dell), and Call It Courage (Sperry).

Mapmaking. Parts of a story can be told visually through charting the location of the various settings with related characters and events. Examples are Souder (Armstrong) and The "Little House" Series.

Posters and bookmarks. The characters of stories and related events and settings, as well as memorable lines and themes, can be related through posters and bookmarks.

Peep shows and dioramas. The parts of the story can be told visually through depicting the particular settings with related characters and events.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A HISTORICAL FICTION UNIT WITH RETELLING EXPERIENCES

The historical fiction unit for sixth grade students was organized around a pioneer story "Attean" found in the Scribner Reading Series, Reaching Higher (Scribner, 1987). The story is an excerpt from the book Sign of the Beaver by Elizabeth George Speare. The unit presented in this paper introduced students to historical fiction works that address the conflicts encountered in pioneer life. Quality pieces were selected to assist students in identifying with people who faced the difficulties of establishing life on a frontier. The students had opportunities to reflect on characters' actions and other cultures and to compare and contrast different historical works. Also students' interests in reading was expanded through experiences with this genre.

The content and activity of this literature-based unit was offered through teacher presentations and learning centers.

Teacher Presentations

The teacher supported students' involvement in the processes and content of this unit by introducing the genre and related activity and by supporting the students as they interacted with the activities as groups and individuals. For example, the teacher monitored small group activity and encouraged them to share their responses to the centers. This sharing showed other students the potential of the centers.

The teacher read aloud the full length book Caddie Woodlawn (Carol Ryre Brink) and the picture book The Quilt Story (Tony Johnston) to introduce quilts and quilting and brought quilts to show as she explained quilting and the heritage of quilts in families.

Learning Centers

The learning centers presented in this unit were two types--sustaining centers and centers specific to the study.

Sustaining centers. These centers are usually present in a literature-based instructional program and serve as natural structures for the learning environment. The content of some centers change with the progression of unit study, while others serve as references.

For this unit, the Reading Center (an essential center for a literature-based program) supplied many historical fiction works on pioneers with a range of reading levels. The works included in this center are listed in the appendix. Included in this center was a bulletin board with book jackets from historical works to encourage student reading. Two reference centers--How to Share a Book and Ways to Retell a Story--were available to foster student response. In the case of the latter, the specific activities (speaking, writing, acting, and art) described in the previous section on Retelling Stories Through Many Modes of Expression were included.

Centers specific to the unit. The students, divided into five small groups by the teacher, chose centers they wished to be involved in as a group, a subgroup, or individuals. These centers supported story retelling and other expressive activity.

Center: Sarah, Plain and Tall

Literature Experience

Read Patricia MacLachlan's Sarah, Plain and Tall.

Expressive Activity

Compose a sequel to the story. You may want to write your story from the point of view of Sarah or one of the children.

Center: Responses to the Prairie

Literature Experience

Read Sarah, Plain and Tall (MacLachlan), Third Girl from the Left (Turner), and Prairie Songs (Conrad).

Expressive Activity

Compare and contrast the three young women's responses to living on the prairie. You may ask other students in the class to assist you in this discussion. The ideas from the discussion might be presented to the class through an oral sharing, perhaps in costume, and illustrated by posters, dioramas, or filmstrips.

Center: Survival Alone

Literature Experience

After reading Sign of the Beaver (Speare), you might read Robinson Crusoe (Defoe), Island of the Blue Dolphins (O'Dell), or Abel's Island (Steig).

Expressive Activity

In considering surviving alone, you might want to list the problems these characters encountered.

Center: Quiltmaking

Literature Experience

Read some of these books: Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt (Ernst), The Patchwork Quilt (Flournay), The Quilt Story (Johnson), The Quilt (Jonas).

Expressive Activity

- (1) Inquire at home about quilts in your family and stories associated with them. Then write a story.
- (2) Look at the packets of templates representing traditional quilts and background information. Then with wallpaper, wrapping paper, and other scraps, recreate a quilt block.
- (3) Choose a favorite book to represent in a quilt block through drawing with crayons or liquid embroidery on cloth.

SUMMARY

The historical fiction story from the basal reader was greatly expanded through other literature experiences. The sixth grade students had many opportunities to engage in the language processes and as a result to develop their sense of story and to come to know the elements that make up a unit of meaning. The study of characterization was carried out through comparing the characters' responses in Sarah, Plain and Tall, Third Girl from the Left, and Prairie Songs. Association with the common theme of growing up (but in a different time period) was offered in Caddie Woodlawn. Within this group of stories-- Robinson Crusoe, Sign of the Beaver, Island of the Blue Dolphins, and Abel's Island, students were exposed to several characters' coping with the conflict of survival alone, both their experiences and their emotional responses. These reading experiences motivated much discussion and other expressive activity.

By extending the opportunities beyond the basal reader, the teacher was able to observe and reflect upon the reactions of the students. The students responded in an enthusiastic manner and were eager to experience other works of historical fiction. The survival episodes discussed in the books were made relevant to the students as they eagerly shared their own "survival episodes" with the class. The quilting activity allowed the

children to take ownership of the experience. They were proud of their accomplishments and expressed a desire to design and sew more quilt blocks. From these positive responses, the teacher was assured of the benefits of going beyond the basal. The students were anxious to do another unit with an extended literature base and accompanying learning centers.

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