”ONLINE STORYTELLING: ENGAGING, PERSONAL, CREATIVEA”

Sultonova Gulsara,

the english teacher of Vobkent district Polytechnicum №1

Abstract: *This article is designed to improve students' ability through online storytelling*

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How can we engage learners intellectually, emotionally and imaginatively in online storytelling? .

Storytelling may be the most effective way to sustain a close relationship with our students when teaching online. When we retell stories from the world's oral cultures and then do creative response activities with our students, we can use the webcam, the online chat, breakout rooms and digital recordings to humanise the online learning experience.

Most of my experience as a storyteller has involved sharing a physical environment whether in classrooms, communal or outdoor spaces and I was not certain before the pandemic that it would be possible to transfer and adapt so many aspects of this creative and communal activity to online learning.

As a relatively low-tech teacher, my tendency is to switch off the interactive screen when I enter a physical classroom and use it sparingly only when needed. I prioritise face to face interaction, especially when the students and I are storytelling. When I am teaching online, I do not attempt to replicate physical classroom storytelling but rather adapt it by using the

basic tools that videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom, Teams and Facebook Live offer us.

Students put a huge amount of themselves into a story they are being told and they can get insights into each other's lives, cultures, experiences, attitudes and ways of imagining the world through creative response activities.

To illustrate creative storytelling online, let's look at the Japanese myth tale The Rabbit in the Moon, which was beautifully told in a class I was teaching by Sachi Koyama, a Japanese teacher of English. Here is a recording of Sachi telling the story at a cultural sharing event after rehearsing and telling the story in class.

The Rabbit in the Moon
There were three friends, Monkey, Fox, and Rabbit. One day, a poor old man appeared and asked the three animals, 'Please give me food. I'm hungry.' The kind animals wanted to help. Monkey ran up into the trees, climbing high, picking fruit and nuts. Fox went hunting and caught some small animals. Fox also stole some rice cakes. Monkey and Fox came back to the hungry old man and made a fire to cook the small animals. But Rabbit returned to the fire with no food for the old man. Monkey and Fox laughed and Rabbit felt so sorry. The old man was busy eating when Rabbit said, 'I have nothing to give you, but you can eat me!' and jumped into the fire. The old man caught Rabbit and changed into his true self, a great shining god. 'Rabbit, you are kind and gentle. You are ready to give your life for me. I will put you in the Moon. The Moon will shine kindly and gently down on the world. When the Moon is full, everyone will look up and see the Rabbit in the Moon and remember your gentle kindness.'

You can choose from and adapt the sample activities in the storytelling lesson plan below for different folk tales and for different class profiles. You will notice that all of these activities can be done in the physical classroom and have been adapted for online teaching.

Before telling

Introduce the characters in the story by revealing them one by one to the camera on a hand written list. Using our own handwriting helps personalise the online format: monkey, fox, rabbit, hungry old man

Quick-fire Quiz: Set a time limit for students to question you using the chat about the events in the story. Respond orally to their written questions. This might be as short as one minute when you are going to tell a very short tale told to a fast-acting class, but could be as long as three minutes for a longer story told to a slower-paced group of students. You can give away plenty of information in your answers but do not give away the ending.

Now students have a skeleton of the story with some bones missing and are ready to make predictions. This is a good moment to put pairs in breakout rooms to creatively tell the story they are imagining. Alternatively you can give students a few minutes to write a summary of the story they are imagining in the chat and to post their summaries all together at the same moment when you signal that they can. Students can listen to or read other students' predictions.

Students are now full of anticipation and ready to listen to you telling the story so that they can compare it with their imagined versions. It is a good idea to ask students to sit quietly and comfortably and rest their fingers while they are listening to the story, allowing themselves space to imagine.

After telling

Students will probably want to write or say some instant responses to the story. Invite them to write or talk about similarities and differences between the story you told and the one they predicted.

Ask students to choose a moment from the story that leaves a strong impression. After three different students have each chosen and described a moment to the group either through their microphone or through the chat, invite students to stand up and adjust the position of their devices so they are looking into the camera. Ask them to do a FREEZE of each of these three moments. They should use their bodies and faces and especially their eyes to communicate that moment through the camera, for example 'You are the hungry old man asking the animals for food, 3-2-1 FREEZE!' Point out that the FREEZE drama technique is an effective way of communicating a moment from a story physically and it works best to be physically and emotionally expressive using our bodies and faces to make the moment larger than life. The advantage of looking into the camera is that students can see each other's FREEZE's while they themselves are doing their own FREEZE. There is no reason not to do this even where students are not able or not permitted to have their cameras switched on. Moving their bodies is essential when students are learning online.

Add a list of personal response questions to the chat and give students a couple of minutes before they go into breakout rooms to individually choose three or four of the questions and prepare to talk about their answers. Remind students that in breakout rooms they should share the answers they have prepared rather than ask their questions. Before they enter breakout rooms, point out that the activity is all about noticing that different students will choose different questions and that they can learn from the way each individual person responds to the same story told by the same person in different ways. Ask them to notice and respond to these differences. The list here is not specific to a particular story and includes questions to do with senses, associations, experience, preferences, meanings, empathy and critical thinking.

- Which character made a strong impression on you?
- Who in your family might enjoy this story?

- What was the strongest image in your mind during the story?
- What colour was the story?
- What sounds did you imagine during the story?
- What was your strongest feeling during the story?
- What surprised you in the story?
- What did the story mean to you personally?
- What did you like best in the story?
- What didn't you like in the story?
- What did you notice about the storyteller's voice?
- Was listening to the story like being in a dream?
- Which character in the story were you?
- Does this story make you think about an experience in your life?
- Is it a children's story?
- What question is missing from this list?

After they come back to the main room, invite some students to reflect on the differences between their responses which they found most interesting.

Invite students to do some creative writing, for example a poem, inspired by the story and incorporating their own responses to the questions as well as other students' responses. Including other students' responses not only solves the problem of some students not knowing what to write but is also an exercise in empathy, experiencing the story through other students' imaginations. Students can perform their poems and add recordings and/or written versions of their poems on a shared platform where they can comment on what they enjoy about each other's poems. 'Storytelling is a union of head, heart and spirit and a unique expression. We should therefore allow space for an individual response from those with whom we share our understanding' writes Grace Hallworth, Patron of the Society for Storytelling, UK in The Call for Stories, Oracle 2006.

You might explore a central theme of the tale and tell students a personal story about a time when you or somebody you know well was at the receiving end of a random act of kindness or even self-sacrifice. Make the connection between the folk tale and the personal story you tell explicit. For example I might tell a story I've always remembered about the time when a French businessmen, out of the goodness of his heart, picked up a drenched British teenage hitch hiker in his shiny new car in the pouring rain late one evening and took a 100-kilometre diversion from his route to treat me to a meal at an excellent bistro and then drop me at the next campsite. Like the rabbit, nothing was more important to that businessman than to show hospitality to a forlorn stranger.

Ask if some of your students have an act of kindness story to tell which The Rabbit in the Moon reminds them of and which they can tell in the next lesson. To help them think of a story invite them to close their eyes while you ask them some prompt questions to help them structure their story:

- When did the act of kindness happen – how long ago, what time of year, what time of day?
- Where did the story happen? Describe the location.
- Who were the people in the story? What was the relationship between them?
- What was the situation?
- How did the different people feel about the situation?
- What happened? What was the sequence of events?
- What was the result?
- How did the different people feel at the end?
- Why do you remember this story?

Once students are familiar with storytelling and creative response activities, it is time for them to learn and tell stories themselves. They can learn to tell The Rabbit in the Moon in their own words. Explain that, after you have finished telling them the story another time, they will have three minutes to draw a series of six

quick pictures on a piece of paper. These pictures will retell the story and act as a memory aid for when they retell the story to each other in pairs in breakout rooms. After students have all had a chance to retell the story to a partner in a breakout room, talk about the value of retelling the same story to different people and to rehearse by making audio or video recordings until they are ready to share their storytelling on a shared platform like a padlet.

Invite students to comment on what they enjoy about each other's recordings focusing on physicality, voice, emotion, clarity and creativity.

When students are ready, invite them to choose a very short story they would like to tell. This is ideally a tale they already know well in their first language, such as a tale from their own heritage or an Aesopp's fable. You can also provide a list of recommended tales. Again they can rehearse and record and share these and receive comments from each other. Finally they can tell their chosen stories live to their classmates. This might happen over a series of classes featuring one student storyteller at the start of each class or you can arrange a live online storytelling class festival. After retelling a story we had learned together, Reevan Kunwor, a 15-year-old boy from Nepal, went on the following week to tell us The Liar Shepherd (or The Tiger's Coming), a Nepali variant of The Boy who cried Wolf. Reevan said, 'I did something which I had never done before like online storytelling, retelling and recording. I was very nervous in the beginning but it made me happy and I enjoyed doing it.'

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