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# Interactive Storytelling: Scaffolding Children's Early Narratives

Ann M. Trousdale

"Tell me the story about the time your kitten climbed the tree and wouldn't come down." "Tell me the story about the time you came to see us and you left your headlights on and we had to call someone to start your car." "Tell me the story. . . ."

My storytelling with Tim began as recountings of true events, evolving over time into retellings of stories familiar to both of us. Tim was three when I came to know him, and our storytelling would occur during my visits with him and his parents. As Tim became more familiar with these stories, however, he began to take over parts of the stories to tell himself, and a pattern in our storytelling developed that has come to interest me more and more as an educator.

I have long understood the value of reading to children; many of my happiest childhood memories are of my father's reading to us four children, sometimes with all of us piled up in the big four-poster bed together or sometimes in the living room, my father sitting in the wing chair under the reading lamp while we sat or lay about to listen. Br'er Rabbit, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Long John Silver. Sometimes my father would start chuckling and have to stop reading to laugh at Tom and Huck's escapades, or Br'er Rabbit's cleverness. Good memories, memories that have served me well. Reading is for me still one of life's great pleasures.

But my father was a wonderful storyteller too, and my storytelling with Tim likely had its unconscious origins in the delight with which we would hear again and again stories from our father's childhood. As Tim's and my storytelling developed along the path it took, I came to see new possibilities in telling stories to children. The value of reading to children has been well established, but the value of storytelling with children is often overlooked or deprecated.

Furthermore, somehow print seems to exercise an authority over readers that oral language does not exercise. We learn very early that oral discourse is negotiable, flexible; print is immutable.

What does this mean with respect to fostering children's language and literacy development? I think it suggests that *storytelling* may be used in ways that are different from and beyond the influence of reading to children. Storytelling offers ways to bring children into the act of storymaking, ways of creating stories *with* children and not just *for* or *to* children. It is

this way of bringing children into the act of storytelling that I discovered during my storytelling sessions with Tim.

### Storytelling with Tim

As Tim became more and more familiar with the stories I would tell him, he began to take over parts of them to tell himself: "Yeah, and then you got the ladder and climbed up it and called her and she still wouldn't climb down." The more confident Tim grew in his ability to carry the story line, the more he began to allow his imagination to create possible alternative solutions to the problems in the stories. He began to elaborate on certain elements, and eventually invented ways to bring himself into the action. "And then Tim the fireman came with his hook and ladder, climbed up, and got Susannah out of the tree."

Soon our storytelling became a cooperative venture—always enjoyable but not always predictable. As Tim learned that his input was acceptable, he felt free to offer novel solutions which would then be incorporated into the story. Yet he seemed to be able to differentiate between the elaborated fantasy versions and the original "true" story. Once when he asked me to tell about the time Susannah climbed the tree and I began to tell the "true" version, he interrupted me, insisting that he didn't want the "real" story, but the one about himself as the fireman.

I introduced Tim to the folktale "Jack and the Beanstalk," telling it to him rather than reading it. Tim listened enthralled to this exciting new story of adventure and danger. It became his favorite, and he requested it again and again—and I began to wish I had never told it to him in the first place. As he became more familiar with the story, he began to express story events and actions, gesturing with his hands to indicate how high the beanstalk was growing, or joining in with the giant's "Fe-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman."

One day as I was telling about Jack's taking the cow to town to sell her and his meeting an old man on the road, I was surprised to learn from my listener that "that old man was *Tim*," who gave Jack the magic beans in exchange for the cow. Then Tim fell silent, and I continued to tell the story.

Then, when Jack was about to climb the beanstalk, who should appear but his friend Tim, who joined Jack in his adventure. From that time, Tim not only injected himself into the tale as a character, he began taking over segments of the story to tell himself. He began to elaborate on incidents, incorporating characters and information from other sources, introducing variations on the plot.

I did not realize that Tim was upset by Jack's mother's punishing him for his apparent foolishness by sending him to bed without his supper, until in one telling Tim had the character Tim give Jack not only magic beans in

exchange for the cow but the ten dollars that his mother had requested as the sale price for the cow as well—thereby eliminating his mother's displeasure and Jack's punishment. Never again was Jack sent to bed without his supper.

In a subsequent telling, Tim brought in Superman as ultimate savior, then in a later telling became Superman himself, changing into his Superman suit behind a handy bush before climbing the beanstalk with Jack. In this telling, Tim "zapped the giant with the magic zap from his fingers"; he zapped the beanstalk at the end as well.

During these tellings, Tim seemed to move easily from the role of listener to the role of teller and teller-participant, calmly and authoritatively taking over segments of the story to tell (or create) himself. Following is a segment of one of our tellings of "Jack and the Beanstalk":

- A: So he went over to that great, big house and knocked on the door.  
 T: Boom!  
 A: Boom! Boom! In a minute the door opened, and this great, big lady opened the door!  
 T: And she said, she looked around and she looked down there, and it was Tim and Jack.  
 A: She said, "Well, how're you doing?" She said, "I'll tell you one thing. You sure had better clear out of here, because if my husband sees two boys around his place, he'll eat you for supper."  
 T: And he said, "Oh, no, he won't, 'cause I gotta ask ya something. Is he afraid of Super Friends?"  
 A: "Super Friends?" she said. "I don't know if he's afraid of Super Friends, 'cause I don't think he ever heard of Super Friends."  
 T: "Well, they're some people that are super 'cause they save things."  
 A: "I see."  
 T: "And I brang the Superman, the Superman suit and the Batman suit for me and him."  
 A: "Oh, well, in that case, if you have a Superman and a Batman suit maybe you can come in, and I can give you a little bit of something to eat and you won't be afraid of the giant."  
 T: "Or maybe the giant will be afraid of *us*"  
 A: "That's right," she said.  
 T: "So maybe we could just hide somewhere and when we hear him . . . and when we hear some talkin' around here we'll come out. Maybe that's a good idea."

I decided to introduce Tim to a new story and again to taperecord our sessions to see if I could discover any explanations for what seemed to be happening. I adapted a mountain variant of "The Brave Little Tailor," from Richard Chase's *Jack Tales* (1946). I expected that it would take a few tellings for Tim to participate in the telling of this new story—but to my surprise he entered into it the first time.

In the version I told to Tim, Jack swats seven flies that land in his honey. He's proud of himself and makes himself a belt that says "Mighty Man Jack, Killed Seven at a Whack." The king sees the belt, is impressed, and asks Jack to rid the mountains of three wild beasts: first a boar, then a unicorn, and finally a lion. By dint of good luck, Jack does accomplish those feats and is rewarded by the king.

Tim began to comment on certain elements in the story, such as the likelihood of the honey and the flies getting stuck on the fly swatter—a sticky problem that had to be resolved before we could go on.

As Jack confronted the wild animals that came after him, Tim supplied the noises that the animals made. During the first two episodes with the wild beasts, Tim was essentially listening to this new story and participating in a minimal way. But when I came to the third task, Jack's confrontation with the lion, Tim began to supply story events himself, inventing as he went along. The two previous encounters had set up for him a pattern which he now confidently assumed he could follow. His story, of course, was not the traditional one: in the traditional one, the lion trees Jack, Jack steps on a rotten branch and falls on the lion, is afraid to get off and so rides the raging lion into town where the lion is shot. Here, however, is Tim's version:

- A: Jack sees a sycamore tree, skinnies up up the sycamore tree real fast and there's that lion, comes to the bottom of the tree snarlin' and prowlin' around . . .
- T: I know what lions can do. You know what lions can do? They can go, they can go [*makes scratching gestures*].
- A: That's right. And that's exactly what he was doing to the bottom of that tree. Tryin' to scratch it down and gnaw it in two so the tree'd fall down and he could get Jack. Well, the lion pretty soon got tired. Fell down by the bottom of the tree, decided to take a little nap. Curled up at the bottom of the tree . . .
- T: Yeah, I bet he curled up like that [*lies down in fetal position*].
- A: He did. Curled up like that and fell asleep. Jack, he was lookin' down at that lion from that branch he was on, tryin' to see . . .
- T: And I bet, I bet he found, he broke, um, a stick up on that sycamore tree and it was sharp and came down, down, um, the tree and keew! Put the sharp point of the stick in the lion.
- A: In the lion?
- T: Yeah.
- A: That would be a good thing to do, all right, and then what would happen?
- T: He would be dead and he could take the other, um, um, end of the branch and pick it up and wheew! Throw it into a real trap place.
- A: Right.
- T: So if he got the stick out and he was still alive he would be trapped.
- A: Yes.

T: But he could scratch the door out.

A: Yes. *[Pause]* And then what would happen? Then what would Jack do next?

T: I don't know.

A: Well, Jack goes down the mountain . . . *[picks up the story and continues, using Tim's additions]*.

Here Tim is confidently inventing his own story, coming up with problems, solving them, bringing in complications in quite an advanced way—until he runs out of solutions. Every storymaker runs out of ideas every now and then.

### **Scaffolding**

In analyzing the transcriptions of our tellings of “Jack and the Varmints” and “Jack and the Beanstalk,” I began to notice patterns in our interaction which seemed to offer some explanations for Tim’s readiness to participate in the telling of the stories—and to account for his growing facility in doing so.

First, Tim expected to be allowed to participate in the telling of the story. This expectation had built up over time. Second, he expected his contributions to be accepted and used. Third, it was clear that he was bringing to the storytelling all kinds of information and knowledge from other sources along with his own problem-solving strategies and powers of imagination. Fourth, his contributions were worthy of being taken seriously; they furthered the story in interesting—if unexpected—ways.

As I looked over my own verbal behavior, I noticed that, as much as introducing Tim to stories that were familiar to me, I had led him to expect that he would be accepted as a participant in the telling of the story. But I also realized something that I had not been aware of before analyzing the transcriptions. I had been providing Tim with verbal support for his contributions, an understructure, a scaffold for his emerging attempts at furthering the story line.

A verbal scaffolding for children’s emergent oral language ability has been noted in studies of care-givers’ interactions with very young children (Bruner 1978). The scaffold provided by the care-giver is a predictable verbal support for the child’s early utterances, a dialogue sustained by the care-giver, contingent upon the child’s response or utterances. Studies of mothers’ interactions with children even at the babbling stage reveal the adult’s attempts to impute intentionality to the child’s utterances (Snow 1977). In a study of interactions between mothers and children who were rapid language learners, Cross (cited in Lindfors 1987) noted that the mothers tended not to control the focus or direction of the conversations with their children but rather tended to allow the children to initiate and to ter-

minate topics. A high percentage of the mothers' utterances were directly contingent upon what the children had said.

In the kinds of interactions which foster early language development, then, the child is treated as a valuable participant in speech events and is encouraged in the turn-taking conventions typical of conversational events. According to Bruner (1978), Snow (1977), Cross (1975), and others who have studied children's early language development, this predictable verbal support is a significant factor for children in early language development. This kind of scaffolding is similar as well to the extending and expanding on young children's language that Cazden (1972) found as having positive effect in language development.

Vygotsky (1978) uses the term "zone of proximal development" to describe the distance between "the individual's actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of *potential* development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 68). It is in the zone of proximal development that the more competent individual is able to assist the young and less competent to achieve higher ground. It is here that the scaffold is laid, in this area that encouraging and supporting the child's contributions can effectually carry the child farther in thought and expression of thought. Human learning, says Vygotsky, or "good learning," takes place in the area between what people can generate on their own and what they can comprehend when it is presented before them. The effective "helper" provides the scaffolding, the support, for the child's linguistic efforts, while always remaining on the growing edge of the child's competence. As I examined my own verbal behavior with Tim in our storytelling, I realized that I had unconsciously been working with him in just this area, providing this kind of scaffolding, this kind of acceptance and support and incorporation of his ideas in our storytelling together.

In reflecting on my storytelling with Tim and in the storytelling I have done with children since, I have come to recognize that this kind of scaffolding in storytelling provides a helpful structure for a young child's emergent narrative ability. We do not, after all, leave children on their own to learn how to talk. Nor is it simply through hearing language that children develop as language users; research in young children's language acquisition has well established that children's language development is greatly influenced by the degree and nature of their verbal interaction with adults. Children's mastery of the narrative mode can similarly be enhanced through interactions with adults in storytelling.

When children are allowed to participate in the story-making process in a safe and predictable way, knowing that they can take risks and get adult help when they need it, their ability to create and sustain narrative is greatly enhanced.

### Differences Between Reading Aloud and Storytelling

Reading to children is invaluable. Besides the immeasurable pleasure it provides for both parents and children, being read to at home in the early years prepares children to become early independent readers. Through having books read to them, children learn about story structures; but through *telling* stories, children actively manipulate and learn to control those structures.

Through both reading aloud and storytelling, children are brought into a story world, a secondary world, which the child may experience through the imagination. But that secondary world is slightly different in reading aloud and in storytelling.

In reading aloud to a child, the attention of both reader and listener is focused on a third, concrete object—the printed page. A triadic relationship is set up among the reader, the listener, and the text. There may be personal interaction between the reader and the listener, on either an affectionate level (like snuggling) or an information-seeking level (“What’s that?”). But when the child is deeply engaged in the story world, it is a world that has come into being between the child and the text, as Figure 1 indicates.

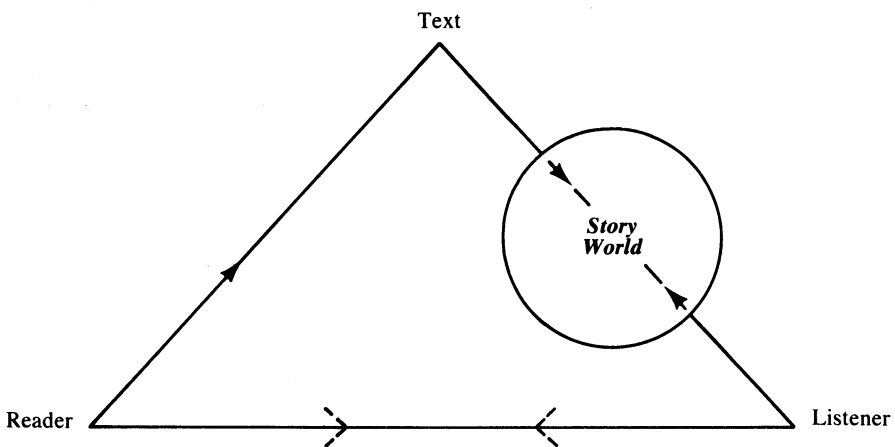


Figure 1. Story-reading

In reading aloud, the reader serves chiefly to make the creation of the story world between the child and the text possible.

In traditional storytelling, the interaction between the teller and the listener is direct. It is not mediated or directed through a text. The eye contact, the body language, the whole range of emotional response, of paralinguistic cues and cue giving serve to create an act of communication that



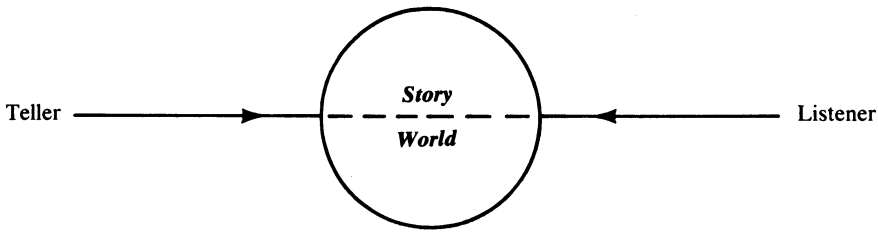


Figure 2. Traditional Storytelling

is intimate, personal, and mutual. The story world is created in the communication between the teller and the listener, as Figure 2 shows.

In interactive storytelling, however, when both parties become engaged in creating the story world, that world grows larger and larger, gradually encompassing both teller and listener as inhabitants and creators of that world. See Figure 3.

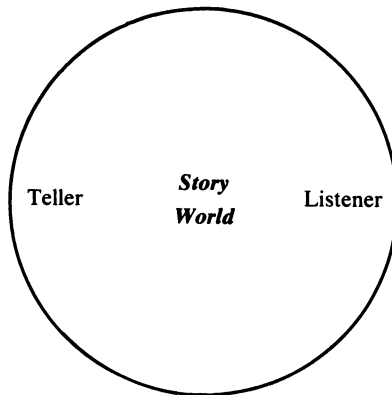


Figure 3. Interactive Storytelling

In our interactive storytelling, both Tim and I were actively involved in creating and sustaining the secondary world.

### Beyond Scaffolding

As Tim became more adept in sustaining familiar narrative, he began to initiate the interactive telling of new stories from his own imagination. These stories became a part of his bedtime routine with his parents or with me if I was visiting. Tim would typically begin these stories with a conventional opening, would establish a situation and a conflict, then wait for the adult to further the plot. The direction of these stories was increasingly determined by Tim; the adult participation seemed to be invited for the pleasure

of the social interaction rather than need for scaffolding. As the stories became longer and longer, with conflict and resolution following conflict and resolution, we realized that he was using the stories to forestall "lights out" and would have to tell him that it was time to end the story. By the time Tim was five, he was successfully bringing his own stories to completion.

The oral narratives seemed to have a carry-over into the written mode for Tim. When he was five, he presented me with a book he had made, telling and illustrating the story of David and Goliath. He had asked his mother to help him spell the words he needed, but he had sustained the story himself, from the introduction of the characters through the resolution of the conflict.

When Tim was six, I gave him a recording of Richard Chase telling the Jack Tales. He would occasionally ask to hear the recording at bedtime. One day several months later he calmly asked his parents and me, "Would anybody like to hear a story?" And he told from beginning to end the story "Jack and the Robbers," the mountain variant of "The Bremen Town Musicians." It is a highly complex and detailed story. Richard Chase's telling of the story takes twenty-five minutes; Tim's telling took about fifteen, but he included every major element. Quite an accomplishment for a six year old.

### **Into the Schools**

My experiences with Tim in storytelling have stimulated me to do interactive storytelling with other children, in school settings. I find that, with some preparation and adjustment, it works in classrooms as well, and particularly with small groups of children.

The storytelling can include well-known folktales or familiar stories from books. Or they can be stories which the adult and child or children create on the spot. I have taken cues from my storytelling with Tim to invite children to participate in several ways. They may be encouraged to supply sound effects or dialogue. I have found that, as the children become familiar with the story, they can be invited to take turns in telling the story—although some adult regulation of turntaking may have to be used with groups of children who may be vying with one another for the spotlight. I have used a bean bag or a Koosh ball to pass around, and a bell to signal when it is time to let another child continue the telling. With Tim these conventions developed naturally and spontaneously; with small groups of children the "rules" will need to be established. I've also noticed that it doesn't take more than two tellings of a folktale for children as young as kindergarten to know the story well enough to participate in the telling themselves.

One of the stories which I have told to children in classrooms is "The

Little Red Hen." To encourage interactive telling of this folktale, I have taken with me stuffed animals for each character. After the story has become thoroughly familiar to the children, the stuffed hen, dog, cat, and rat are given to individual children. I continue to "tell" or narrate the story, but when each character speaks, the child who is holding the hen, or dog, or cat, or rat, speaks that character's words. Holding the animals seems to give the children a sense of security and authority.

In these interactive sessions, the children's faces reflect intense concentration as they wait for their turn to speak. They speak their parts with accuracy and conviction. Their language reflects their ability to appreciate and use the vivid language which is found in the story: "The little hen bustled into the house," they say; "'Not I,' yawned the dog." And at the end are very satisfied—and want to do it again!

By making storytelling an interactive event we can help children feel comfortable enough in storytelling to be confident of their own emergent narrative ability, to take risks, to elaborate, to invent, to explore, and thereby to grow. To learn what a story is from the inside out, by creating the story world oneself, is to learn about storying in a way that makes the process one's own. Such storytelling provides children with the authority of personal knowledge—and the self-confidence gained through success.

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