

# Story as World Making

Stories are woven so tightly into the fabric of our everyday lives that it's easy to overlook their significance in framing how we think about ourselves and the world. They fill every part of our daily lives as we talk about events and people, read books and news reports, gossip, send text messages, listen to music, watch video clips, and catch up on a favorite television show. We live storied lives.

Stories are thus much more than a book or narrative—they are the way our minds make sense of our lives and world. We work at understanding events and people by constructing stories to interpret what is occurring around us. In turn, these stories create our views of the world and the lens through which we construct meaning about ourselves and others. We also tell stories to make connections, form relationships, and create community with others.

These stories provide a way for us to move between local and global cultures and to explore the ways in which people live and think in cultures that differ from our own. Whether these stories are directly shared with us by global members of our immediate community or through literature from people living in distant geographical places, they provide access to shared and unique experiences and beliefs. We need more than facts to understand the storied lives of people in diverse global cultures.

Despite the significant ways in which stories frame our world views and identities, their role in making sense of life is often not recognized or valued. In schools, students are given access to stories primarily through literature, but the focus is not on the value of the stories themselves. Instead, literature is used to teach something else—reading skills,

critical thinking, writing models, historical events, mathematical concepts. Many teacher education programs have eliminated children's literature as a separate course, choosing to integrate literature into a range of methods courses where the focus again is how to *use* literature to teach something else. The many different forms in which stories are commonly told and shared outside of schools are also often not recognized or valued within classrooms.

If we step back from the pressure of tests and standards and consider why story matters and the ways in which story *is* thinking and world making, we have time to reconsider and recapture the role of story and literature in our classrooms. Focusing on story as world making also provides insights into how the public story about schools and teachers frames policies and provides an opportunity to consider how we can participate in telling a different story.

## But First, a Story . . .

*The Story of Three Kingdoms* (1995), written by Walter Dean Myers and illustrated by Ashley Bryan, tells of a time long ago when the world was divided into the three kingdoms of forest, sea, and sky, each ruled by a creature so powerful that people lived in fear. Because the People did not have the strength of Elephant, the ferocity of Shark, or the ability to fly like Hawk, they were forced to do their bidding.

One day, Elephant fell into a deep pit in the ground and could not pull himself out. That night, as the People sat around the fire, one told a story about moving a large stone that stood where a group wanted to build a village. What one person could not do alone, many people pulling together were able to accomplish. They told the story over

and over and “the idea warmed in the minds of the People and they knew it was good.” The next day, they were able to pull Elephant out of the hole with vines, and he promised to share the forest with them from that time on.

Sometime later, the People were suffering because Shark would not allow them to fish for food. As they sat around the fire, a woman told a story about how her grandmother accidentally dropped a woven mat into a small stream. A lizard swam into the weaving and was not able to escape. Again the People “warmed the idea carefully in their minds, and knew it was good.” And so the next day, they wove a large net and dropped it into the water to entangle Shark. He could not free himself and so finally promised to share the sea with them.

Hawk watched these events and taunted the People as he flew above them, certain that his kingdom was the greatest. And even though the People trembled, they now knew what to do and so gathered around the fire to tell stories. Finally, one told the story of a child trying to catch a butterfly. After many attempts, the child was able to do so by waiting until the butterfly came to rest. This story “warmed in the minds of the People and they knew the idea was good.” The next day, they waited until Hawk came to rest on a branch of his favorite tree, then they threw a loop of vines around his neck. When he was unable to free himself, Hawk agreed to share the air.

The People gathered to celebrate around the fire, telling stories about the events and chanting that they were now masters of the earth. As they told the stories, however, they realized that they did not need to rule the earth. Their strength came from the wisdom gained from telling stories. Instead of ruling the earth, they could use stories and wisdom to share the earth.

And from that day on, the People remembered to sit by the fire and tell stories, “never forgetting that in the stories could be found wisdom and in wisdom, strength.”

## Story as Meaning Making

Story is the way we make sense of the world. Harold Rosen (1986) argues that stories are a way to

move from the chaotic “stuff” of daily life into understanding. An endless flow of experiences surround us on a daily basis, and we invent beginnings and endings to organize our experiences by creating a meaningful sequence of facts and interpretations. Stories impose order and coherence on that stream of experiences and allow us to work out significance. Stories thus provide a means of structuring and reflecting on our experiences (Bruner, 1988). We tell our stories to others to invite them to consider our meanings and to construct their own, as well as to better understand those experiences ourselves. The story of the three kingdoms reminds us that stories are what distinguish us from other living beings—stories make us human. The nature of a life is that it’s a story.

Story is thus a mode of knowing—one of the primary ways in which we think and construct meaning from our experiences. Story captures the richness and nuances of human life, accommodating the ambiguity and complexity of situations in the multiplicity of meanings inherent to any story (Carter, 1993). Although traditionally thought is seen as an instrument of reason, there are forms of thought that are narrative in nature rather than logical. Barbara Hardy (1968) believes that story is a primary act of mind,

[f]or we dream, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order to really live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future. (p. 5)

Our views of the world are a web of interconnected stories, a distillation of all the stories we have shared. We connect to these interconnected past stories in order to understand new experiences (Rosen, 1986). This web of stories becomes our interpretive lens for new experiences so that story is our means of constructing the world—of world making.

Rosen (1986) also points out that the distinction between expository text and narrative text and between theories and stories is an artificial one. He argues that theories are just bigger stories. Scientists, for example, create a theory by using current information to tell a story that provides an explana-

tion of a natural phenomenon, such as black holes. They change their stories over time as new information and perspectives become available. A story is thus a theory of something, what we tell and how we tell it reveals what we believe (Carter, 1993).

Stories of the past are particularly significant in framing our thinking about the world. Milton Meltzer (1981), the author of many nonfiction history books on social issues, argues that history *is* memory, consisting of stories about our past that provide us with a sense of humanity. Without these stories of the past, we are nothing, adrift and unable to compare and contrast our current experiences with the past in order to make sense of those experiences. We are locked in the current moment, deprived of memory, and so blinded from understanding the present. Meltzer argues that governments in totalitarian countries thus outlaw the collective memory. In our society, we neglect it, and so fail to see ourselves as part of a larger continuum of life that stretches far behind us and far ahead as well. We need stories of the past to locate ourselves and to envision a reason to take action for social change to create a better world. Without the stories of the past, we are unable to see the possibility of change.

The ways in which we create and tell stories are culturally based. Our human need to story our experiences may be universal, but there is no one way to tell stories (Bruchac, 2003). Our stories are always intertextualized and interwoven with the stories that exist within our own cultures, both in content and in the style and structure of the telling. All children come to school with stories, although the types of stories they are familiar with and the ways in which they tell them may be quite different from school norms. Shirley Brice Heath (1983), for example, found that children coming from a particular African American community had learned to tell fanciful stories in order to get adult attention and to aggressively push their way into conversations. These children were viewed as rude and as telling “tall tales” at school, a misunderstanding of the cultural context of their homes and stories by teachers. The challenge for teachers is not to judge children by what they are lacking, but instead to evaluate their strengths related to the stories they

are bringing to school from their families and communities. If the culture of the community is to enter the culture of the school, that community’s stories must enter as a valued form of making meaning.

## Story and Literature as Life Making

This broader context for story as meaning making provides a way to reexamine the significance of story and literature within classrooms (Short, 2010). Descriptions of children’s literature in elementary classrooms typically focus on how to *use* children’s books to teach something else. Literature is viewed as a resource that is employed to teach reading, math, science, or social studies or as a means of teaching comprehension or writing strategies, celebrating cultural diversity, raising issues of social justice and equity, and creating critical consciousness. Stories can also be a vehicle, as in my case, for building intercultural understandings and global perspectives. Even scholars who argue for the significance of reading aloud and providing an independent reading time for enjoyment do so from the perspective that these engagements will help students become more proficient readers, rather than because reading literature adds significance to a child’s life.

What is often overlooked is that literature and stories are a way of knowing the world. Educators are so focused on using literature for other purposes that they lose sight of literature as having value in and of itself. Literature illuminates what it means to be human and makes accessible the most fundamental experiences of life—love, hope, loneliness, despair, fear, and belonging. Literature is the imaginative shaping of experience and thought into the forms and structures of language. Louise Rosenblatt (1938) argues that children read literature to experience life; they live inside the world of the story to engage in inquiry that transforms their thinking about their lives and world. Stories can

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take many forms, and the increasing variety of digital and interactive formats invites a greater range of readers—surely a cause for celebration, not concern, as these formats invite the active participation of readers in the worlds of story.

The decision about whether to read literature to support students in learning content more effectively or to experience life is not an either/or opposition. Literature can encourage student interest in certain topics and help them understand information and issues. Literature can provide a vehicle for learning about written language and engaging in curricular inquiries. At the same time, these experiences can occur within the context of literature as a way of knowing and critiquing the world.

Charlotte Huck (1982) often reminded us that literature provides experiences that go beyond

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entertainment or instruction by offering the potential to transform children's lives, connecting their hearts and their minds to integrate reason and emotion. Children find themselves reflected in stories and make connections

that transform their understandings of themselves and the world.

Literature was this kind of tool for children in reenvisioning their lives in Leslie Kahn's sixth-grade classroom (Short & Harste, 1996). Gangs and racism were such a common part of their neighborhood that students accepted them without question. Leslie decided that looking at history to take a more distant perspective on racism might support students in gaining new perspectives on their lives; as a result, we developed an inquiry around the genocide and racism of the Holocaust. The students' initial questions were disquieting, focusing on methods of death, and so we immersed them in stories. These stories included novels about Holocaust experiences, visits of several Holocaust survivors, and drama engagements around victims, bystanders, aggressors, and rescuers.

The students' final investigations reflected the transformation in their perspectives as they con-

nected racism to their own lives. For example, several decided to do a survey of children in their school to find out how they chose their friends and whether those friendships crossed racial lines. One particularly powerful inquiry involved a boy for whom gang membership was a valued and accepted practice in his family. His previous focus had not been on *whether* to join a gang, but on which gang to join, because he had uncles in opposing gangs. The stories of the Holocaust survivors led him to question gangs as he investigated the similarities and differences between gangs and the Nazis and Hitler Youth.

Literature expands children's life spaces through inquiries that take them outside the boundaries of their lives to other places, times, and ways of living, exposing them to alternative ways to live their lives and to think about the world. Kathryn Tompkins (2007) read aloud to her fourth-grade students *When My Name Was Keoko* (Park, 2002), a book about the Japanese occupation of Korea during World War II and the loss of freedom for Sun-hee and her family as they are forced to take on Japanese names, language, culture, and history. The students connected powerfully with issues of freedom and their own struggles with the limits imposed on them by parents and teachers, and they engaged in a range of inquiries about this time period and Korean culture. Sun-hee's story took them outside of their own cultural experiences and transformed the ways in which they thought about freedom and their responses to limitations on freedom.

Literature stretches children's imaginations and encourages them to go beyond "what is" to "what might be." Hope and imagination have made it possible for children to be resilient and to rise above their circumstances, to challenge inequity and to envision social change. Jennifer Griffith read aloud to her first-grade students *You Be Me, I'll Be You* (Mandelbaum, 1990), the story of a biracial child who is concerned that she does not look like either of her parents. Many of the children came from multiracial Latino families, and their discussion facilitated their awareness that members of their family who had darker skin were treated differently in the community. Because they loved these family members, they were deeply concerned and, for

the first time, found themselves questioning, rather than accepting, the way people are judged in our society by the color of their skin.

These classroom stories provide examples of story as life making. Transformation occurs as children carry their experiences and inquiries with literature and story back into their worlds and lives. This potential for transformation is also available in reading informational books that are written from the perspective of one enthusiast sharing with another to “light fires” in children’s minds, rather than from the perspective of textbooks written to instruct.

## Story as World Making

Louise Rosenblatt (1938) argues that “literature makes comprehensible the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers” (p. 6). They participate in another’s vision, transforming that vision as well as their own sense of possibility, because literature provides the opportunity to “live through,” not just have “knowledge about” life. This vision provides a way for students to imagine and live within and across global cultures and relationships.

Reading literature and listening to stories encourage readers to put themselves in the place of others, to use imagination to consider the consequences of their decisions and actions. Imagination and the balance of reason and emotion are further developed when readers move from personal response to dialogue with others, where they wrestle with their interpretations of literature. These discussions, therefore, are not just a better way to learn, but essential to democracy. Rosenblatt’s vision of democracy is equitable social relationships in which people choose to live together by valuing individual voices within recognition of responsibility to the group. She believes that people need to have conviction and enthusiasm about their own cultural perspectives, while remaining open to alternative views and becoming aware of others’ needs. Dialogue about literature provides a significant context within which students learn to live with the tension of recognizing and respecting the perspectives of others without betraying their beliefs. Through dialogue, students develop faith

in their own judgments while continuing to inquire and remaining open to questioning their beliefs. Paulo Freire (1970) argues that dialogue thus has the most potential to support transformation and true revolution.

Dialogue around global literature is particularly significant for world making. Many of our students gain their world knowledge through television, video games, and popular movies, many of which focus on catastrophe, terrorism, and war. Their understandings are superficial and grounded in fear and stereotypes, leading to ethnocentrism, a lack of understanding about global cultures, and a stance of pity and superiority over the “poor and unfortunate” in the world. Global literature is an important resource for challenging

these views and exploring interculturalism, because it provides an opportunity for children to go beyond a tourist perspective in which they gain only surface information about another country. Through immersing themselves in story worlds, children can gain insights into how

people feel, live, and think in global cultures. They come to see themselves as connected to children around the world through common humanity and, at the same time, they come to value the differences that make each culture unique.

Books in and of themselves are not enough; how children engage with these books matters. Children can read books from cultures that differ from their own and judge those cultures as “strange” or “exotic,” feeling pity for the characters and gratitude that their society is so much more “advanced.” We can actually establish stereotypes by reading multicultural and global literature with children and only focusing on difference. Fifth graders in Amy Edwards’s class first responded with pity and outrage to *Iqbal* (D’Adamo, 2001), the story of the Pakistani boy who led a movement against forced child labor in carpet mills. They felt pity for the children being forced to work in such

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difficult situations and outrage at parents who were “selling” their children to work in the mills. They also developed misperceptions of Pakistan, believing that all children in that country were forced into child labor (Edwards, 2008). We carefully provided a broader context related to issues of human rights and poverty in Pakistan and the broader world as well as in their own community. Connections to their rights as children and adult impositions and limitations on those rights moved the children from pity to empathy and respect for Iqbal’s willingness to take a stand for other children, not just for his own benefit.

Focusing on connections as well as differences across cultures challenged these students to shift their views of themselves and of children in another part of the world. Just as overemphasizing difference can lead to misconceptions, however, so can overemphasizing connections. Discussions about the values and needs that connect us as human beings are significant, but can lead to colorblindness and a focus on cultural harmony that erases the differences that make us unique as human beings and form our identities (Bolgatz, 2005). In discussing books with fourth and fifth graders about racial tensions in the United States, such as *Freedom Summer* (Wiles, 2001) and *Sister Anne’s Hands* (Lorbiecki, 2000), Lisa Thomas and I noticed that they avoided issues of race with colorblind statements, such as “It doesn’t matter what you look like on the outside; it’s the inside that matters.” Their focus on common humanity was allowing them to avoid discussions about the role of skin color in cultural identity and as a source of discrimination and racism (Thomas, 2007).

The *types* of stories we have available are another influence on story as world making. Story can constrain as well as open up our thinking. We can become so ingrained in familiar ways of telling stories within our own cultures that we no longer consider any other way of thinking feasible—our way has become the norm against which all else is judged. Since our view of the world is a web of interconnected stories, that worldview, along with our biases and misconceptions, is also embedded into our stories. Jackie Woodson (2003) reminds us

that it matters who tells our stories and who sits at our dinner table, suggesting that intimacy of knowing and relationship is essential to writing authentically across cultural values and experiences.

Outsiders to a culture can tell an authentic story through relationships and research, but a world of stories dominated by outsider perspectives about a particular culture is problematic and leads to misconceptions and the absence of significant perspectives (Fox & Short, 2003). Who defines us matters. It matters that literature featuring African American characters and themes is now written by a range of authors with many different experiences and perspectives—both from within the African American community and outside of it. It also matters that literature about American Indians continues to be dominated by outsider views (Horning, 2012). It matters that the stories we read and hear from global cultures are almost all traditional folklore or historical fiction, with only occasional images of contemporary life, creating the misconception that these cultures are frozen in time.

It matters that the majority of global literature read by American children is written and published by Americans and that only 2–3% are translated books written by insiders from those global cultures. If our worldviews are indeed a web of interconnected stories, we need to be concerned that the body of stories of diverse cultures, both within the US and around the world, can suffer from significant omissions and continue to be difficult to access.

## Stories as Professional Identity and Possibility

In 1937, Ludwick Fleck (1981) argued that we form thought collectives as we interact and talk with a group of people over time to create a history and language with each other. All of us know that when we gather within our thought collectives, we talk story. As educators, we make sense of our classroom experiences by sharing stories in teacher lounges as well as in conference presentations, workshops, and publications. By immersing ourselves in stories of practice, we are able to envision the possibilities of those ideas in our own settings.

We need classroom stories of the ways in which teachers are working to bring books and students together to explore these complex issues of intercultural understanding. One source of these stories is *WOW Stories*, an online journal available on Worlds of Words ([wowlit.org](http://wowlit.org)), a website with a range of resources to encourage the use of literature to build international understanding. This collaborative effort, based at the University of Arizona and involving teacher educators from across the US and the world, also includes a searchable database, an online journal of book reviews with a focus on cultural authenticity, and a weekly blog on current issues. *WOW Stories* publishes vignettes by educators and literacy communities that tell a wide range

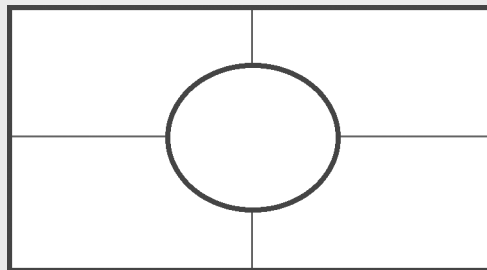
of stories about their experiences with building intercultural understanding through global and multicultural literature in elementary, secondary, and university classrooms.

USBBY, the US national section of the International Board of Books for Young People, along with many other national sections around the world, is another source of stories and resources related to the use of literature as a bridge for international understanding. These resources can be found on their website ([www.usbby.org](http://www.usbby.org)), including an annual list of Outstanding International Books that recognizes excellent children's and adolescent books originally published in another country before being published or distributed in the US.

## STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN WORLD MAKING

After selecting texts rich with possibilities for opening up global world-making discussion, how can we best help students open up and share their meanings with one another? Taken from the University of Arizona's Worlds of Words ([wowlit.org](http://wowlit.org)), the following strategies can help facilitate these discussions:

- **Save the Last Word for Me**—Ask students to choose two or three pictures or small pieces of text that caught their attention and record them on notecards or mark them with sticky notes. Then, in small groups, each student will read or show the chosen text, listen as others respond, and then share the reason he/she selected that text as significant.
- **Sketch to Stretch**—After reading a text or portion of text, ask students to sketch the meaning of the text. Rather than having students draw exactly what happened in the text, encourage them to use color and shape to represent the text's meaning for them. To share their illustrations, students can use the "Save the Last Word for Me" procedures.
- **Consensus Board**—Using large paper, create a consensus board like the one below. Students write their own reactions to the text on one of the quadrants. As a group, they reach a consensus about one or two tensions or questions that remain and write it in the center to discuss in a future meeting.



For more on these and other strategies, see [wowlit.org](http://wowlit.org), especially Kathy Short's language and culture book kits (2012) at <http://wowlit.org/links/language-and-culture-resource-kits>.

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Story has also determined how we are viewed as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. The public story about education in schools and universities has been unrelentingly negative. For years, our position has been to close our classroom doors and teach, but that allows others to tell the stories that define our lives, and we are excluded from that storytelling. Many of us have complained about how public policies and mandates ignore research and the knowledge base we have built in education, embracing instead what politicians view as “common sense.” Their programs and solutions often make better stories because while *we* understand the complexity of learning and teaching, *they* generate simple stories that make good sound bites. The simple story wins out, and we fail to tell our story. This situation is changing through initiatives such as Save Our Schools, but the necessity of teaching the public and ourselves to tell a different story is only increasing.

We need to teach the public to re-author their stories of school, and that’s a huge task because negative habits of mind are deeply embedded in our consciousness and society. Jerome Bruner (1988) explored life as narrative and noticed that members of the same family would tell about the same events but in completely different ways; some only had memories of problem-filled experiences and had filtered out everything else, taking away hope and capability. He pointed out that the ways we tell stories are so habitual that they become recipes for structuring experience itself. Bruner argued that our identities are a story subject to revision and that we sometimes need to re-author our stories and lives. We need to claim this same re-authoring for stories of school.

We live in a world where stories are used against us as educators while, at the same time, our own stories are no longer valued or welcomed. Qualitative research, which is based in stories constructed around data, is not considered rigorous, replicable, or reliable for making decisions or establishing policies. Textbooks, basal readers, and facts are again replacing books and taking away the time for experiences around books from which children can construct significant memories and stories. School

and public libraries are being closed or working with reduced hours, fewer certified librarians, and restricted purchases of books. Even in innovative literacy instruction, we are so busy teaching comprehension strategies, units of study, and mentoring with texts that we are in danger of losing sight of the value of reading to immerse ourselves in the world of the story simply for the sake of what that story adds to our lives. Instead, we stand on top of the story and send down probes to mine the richness for other purposes.

Although there is a great deal of merit in these approaches to literacy and the ways in which real books are used to think about reading and writing, an emphasis on teaching with every book that is read aloud by the teacher or read by a child violates story as life making. Stories are supposed to provide us with shattering, hopeful encounters that allow us to experience deep emotions and make us richer, more compassionate human beings. They can’t do that when they are always being used to teach something else, no matter how important that something else is.

## Stories as Democracy of the Intellect

Katherine Paterson (2000) argues that books and stories provide the basis for the democracy of the intellect, a term she borrowed from Jacob Bronowski (1974). When people can read freely and widely and engage in dialogue with others about that reading, they begin to think and question, something not necessarily valued by politicians and those in control. Public policies and laws that close libraries, limit the availability of books, impose narrow definitions of literacy and research, and dictate what happens in classrooms are a response by those in power to what they see as the threat posed by the democracy of the intellect.

We don’t need stories; they are a frill, unless we believe passionately in the democracy of the intellect and in providing the time that children need to gain the experiences necessary to make wise decisions and develop freedom of imagination. A true democracy of the intellect breaks open the narrowness of the spirit and challenges the selfish interests



of the privileged few. This democracy of the intellect supports us in critiquing society, in questioning what is and who benefits, and in considering what might be in order to take action and work toward a more just and equitable world (Freire, 1970).

Stories summon us to wisdom, strength, and delight and make the richness of imagination available to all of us in order to envision a better world and to take action that makes a difference. Stories have the power to direct and change our lives and world—if we provide the time and space necessary for their role in meaning making, life making, and world making.

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