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Mundy-Taylor, Julie, May, Josephine & Reynolds, Ruth. "Storytelling in 3D: interrogating engagement with oral storytelling in the school classroom" Published in *Storytelling, Self, Society*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 159-182, (2017).

Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13110/storselfsoci.11.2.0159>

Accessed from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1343376>

Storytelling in 3D

Interrogating Engagement with Oral Storytelling in the School Classroom

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This paper outlines the researcher-devised QUEST method to clarify and identify children's engagement with oral storytelling. In a series of research challenges and solution-seeking processes, the storyteller worked with traditional storytelling approaches and also with contemporary digital recordings and analyzing software to follow students' responses to storytelling experiences. As a result of deep analysis that looked beyond the raw data and questioned why certain responses occurred, a set of Indicators of Engagement has been devised. Twenty-five indicators were identified that were further broken down in clusters of common types of engagement behaviors. These indicators can be applied to future studies, with both children and adults that investigate the intriguing phenomenon of storytelling.

Introduction

What is a practising storyteller to do when the story being told to a kindergarten audience of three- and four-year-olds is interrupted by the facility director, who states that the story "isn't being told in the right way"? This surprising incident happened to me after twenty years of storytelling experience. My response was to seek a systematic study that focused on, and evaluated, children's responses to oral storytelling to clarify "the right way." After a long and fruitless search, in the spirit of another early-childhood literature character, the Little Red Hen, I decided that I would "just do it myself." The original question of "how does one tell stories the right way?" however, became the broader question "how do children engage with storytelling?" and I embarked on an eight-year journey to investigate the issue.¹

From an initial search of the literature on storytelling, several research questions evolved to guide the project: (1) What is an appropriate, academically rigorous methodology for investigating engagement with storytelling? (2) How can children's engagement with

storytelling be defined and measured? and (3) How do children experience story, on the basis of observable, behavioral cues?

Although the term QUEST (an acronym for Querying Unexplored Experiences in Story Telling) was developed to explore these research questions, in keeping with the storytelling theme of the study, the notion of a methodological QUEST to discover the best ways to interrogate a phenomenon will have resonance with many different studies.

Clarifying Engagement with Storytelling

Storytelling can be defined as the act of an individual verbally recounting to one or more listeners, without the use of written text, an account of an event or series of events (Boyd 2–28). The story structure is arranged in a logical sequence, incorporating plot, characters, and context, as well as emotional content, motivating factors, and perspective for the narrator.

The term *engagement* became a central marker for this research into how children participate in the exchange with storytelling, so a precise definition is essential. Engagement with a story can be expressed as a “committal of consciousness” (Mundy-Taylor 33), in which the listener surrenders to the experience of the story and shares his or her responses with the storyteller and the rest of the audience, in what MacDonald has termed “breakthrough into play” (412). Therefore, in this research, engagement with storytelling was the observable responses, expressed verbally and physically, that a listener revealed as he or she listened to a story. Engagement required that the listener was experiencing some sort of emotional response to the story, and it was essential to clarify multiple facets of engagement as the research proceeded. The spoken, movement, emotional, and the interactive responses of the child research participants were all video recorded and transcribed as the storytelling process proceeded. In addition, the storyteller included her own responses to the children’s responses as well as noting any contextual factors that impacted the storytelling events. Clarifying indicators of engagement evolved to become a three-dimensional experience.

How to Study Storytelling: The QUEST (Querying Unexplored Experiences in Story Telling)

Accepted processes for qualitative research (Agee; Creswell, *Research Design*; Flick) were adapted to meet the specific needs of research into hitherto unexplored aspects of storytelling. In this study, they were reformulated specifically as the QUEST method to enhance clarity and to better exemplify storytelling as a staged process.

The QUEST method evolved to answer the first research question: what is an appropriate, academically rigorous methodology for investigating engagement with storytelling? It provided a systematic method that aligned with both participatory action research and, to a lesser extent, phenomenology for observing and analyzing aspects of storytelling. The QUEST involved six steps:

1. Apply open-minded observation
2. Preparing the ground—working with stakeholders
3. Data collection
4. Reflective practice
5. Critical interrogation of data
6. Patterns and results

QUEST Step 1: Apply Open-Minded Observation

The plan of the storytelling project consisted of gathering a variety of evidentiary elements commonly found in qualitative research, including research literature, talking to others, and writing and responding to others. Indicators were compiled to enable the gathering of ideas in the field, enabling an initial grid of storytelling responses to be constructed

Research Design Component 1: Basic Parameters of the Research

The length of the storytelling program in the project (five months) required an experienced storyteller, and by using only one storyteller, multiple variables in storytelling presentation

styles were minimized. The structure and content of the long-term storytelling program was devised so the audience would learn what storytelling is, become familiar with the particular storytelling style of the teller, and be exposed to a variety of story genres and types. A sense of security for students, highlighted by Sturm (8) and Zipes (11) as an important element of research design when working with children, was established by the storyteller visiting them in their own classroom, in the company of their classmates, and enforcing consistency with the policies of each classroom.

Research Design Component 2: Types of Data Collection

Conducting research with children involves being sensitive to their reactions to a stranger in their environment, listening to them, and encouraging their involvement in the research process. The importance of encouraging children to articulate their responses to storytelling, in their own way and time, has particularly been stressed by Sipe (479), and a consistent means of capturing children's responses was devised. The storytelling sessions were recorded with a video camera, to be analyzed in detail later. Extensive field notes detailed observations, queries, and conversations conducted with teachers and school staff away from the classroom. These notes often provided a context for responses observed during a storytelling session. These strategies helped answer the second and third research questions.

The importance of children being willing participants in the research (Spriggs 9) was also highlighted through the collection of consent forms from the child participants in addition to from their adult carers. Their voluntary ongoing participation in the research was also clearly explained to the children (Fargas-Malet et al. 178).

Research Design Component 3: Developing the Indicators of Engagement

The Indicators of Engagement measurement tool was formulated as the collected data were analyzed using the open-coding feature of grounded theory (Dey; Cresswell, *Educational Research*; Glaser, *Doing Grounded Theory*; Strauss and Corbin; Tuetteman). As well as new technologies for observation, such as video cameras, the researcher was also able to use

traditional storytelling lore and conversations to ascertain what other storytellers identify as engagement in a storytelling session. Because storytelling is an ancient craft, it was important to ensure that both traditional methods of observation and analysis and modern methods were incorporated in the research design. This was a continued methodological focus throughout the study.

QUEST Step 2: Preparing the Ground—Working with Stakeholders

The research project was conducted in 2004 in a government primary school in the Central Coast region of New South Wales, Australia. Total enrollment in 2004 was 729 students, with a gender ratio of 55 percent boys to 45 percent girls. The school's percentage of students who had a language background other than English was 8.5 percent, and 10 percent of students were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. In consultation with the assistant principal, one kindergarten, one third-grade, and one sixth-grade class were selected as representative of a cross-section of the range of learning stages and literacy skills, both oral and textual, found in primary-school children.

The classes had a total of six storytelling sessions each involving between two and four stories in each session. The huge amount of data generated was managed by selectively analyzing specific points in the storytelling program. Ultimately, the storytelling sessions in week 1, week 2, week 4, and week 6 were comprehensively analyzed. A total of eighty-eight participants provided data for the research. Teachers' participation in the project was voluntary, and they were expected to take no active role in the storytelling sessions. The purpose of the project, ethical considerations, a draft timetable of the storytelling program, and an outline of the type of stories to be told were presented at a preliminary meeting of interested teachers. The issue of voluntary participation was discussed, and it was agreed that any child could withdraw from the research project without giving a reason.

Ethical Dilemmas—the Formal Processes

Formal approval for the research had to be given by the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and also by the Department of Education and Training (DET) of New South Wales (NSW). The HREC is established under the guidelines of the Australian Government *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (updated 2011). These ethical guidelines closely scrutinize all human research on the basis of risk, benefits, and consent. The DET additionally scrutinized the degree of disruption to schools and students in its ethics focus. One issue for the process of ethical approval was the deliberate absence of formal interviewing of participants in the research design, an approach that conflicted with the views of some members of the HREC. In order to meet the aims of the research questions, the children's responses needed to be unmediated, genuine, and voluntary, as recommended in studies such as those by Kirk (1250), Pascal and Bertram (251), and Woodhead and Faulkner (29–30). Additionally, an appropriate method for dealing with adverse circumstances, such as negative responses to particular stories, was established. Ethics approval for extensive video footage, casual group discussions, retellings of stories, and dramatizations was eventually granted.

Ethical Dilemmas—Ethics for Practising Storytellers Involved in Research

In addition to these formal requirements, I had an ongoing role as a practising storyteller and wanted to maintain my professional reputation in the wider community, so a personal ethical stance was also involved. To inform my ethical position on storytelling, I used various writers such as Cooper, Collins, and Saxby; Lipman; and Zipes; as well as many Australian Storytelling Guild mentors. The personal set of ethics that was established during the current study consisted of the following:

Respect the audience. The audience should always be treated with courtesy. The storyteller should pay attention to listeners' responses and recognize the validity of the role of the audience.

Respect the host. The entire school community was the host. The right of members of the host community to ask questions was facilitated by the storyteller's making herself available in the staffroom during lunchtimes and after school hours, in addition to attending Parent and Teacher meetings.

Respect the community you are in. The storyteller was appreciative of the time allocated to the project by the school and wanted to ensure that the storytelling sessions caused the minimal amount of disruption to classes and did not conflict with other scheduled activities.

Respect the culture. Copyright legislation was observed and the work of others acknowledged. Each story used was my adaptation of a tale, based on various versions of the story, and I ensured that the selected stories were "public" stories in that particular culture, that is, that they were not sacred stories that had been misappropriated. The weekly reference list of stories was given to the classroom teachers, the school project manager, and the school librarian.

The Story Selection Process

The importance of devoting time to the selection of stories cannot be underestimated. The participants needed to be drawn to the practice of storytelling as an enjoyable activity that aroused their interest and made them keen to hear more. In this study, a total of 114 stories were selected for possible inclusion. A developing familiarity with different genres of story and storytelling types was a primary focus of the project, and thus the stories covered a range of genres, from myths and legends to fairy tales and folk tales, tall stories, pour quoi tales, and cumulative stories. The participants were exposed to numerous ways of presenting storytelling using just voice and gesture, in addition to stories told using puppets, origami, felt boards, musical instruments, and other props.

The Story Preparation Process

The presentation of a successful storytelling program relies on the meticulous preparation of each story. The development of indicators to trace engagement with stories required successful storytelling events over a period of time, and so preparation was a very important aspect of the research methodology. The ten-step storytelling process,² based on theoretical insights from research literature, evolved during the project. Chambers (16–17) has explained that each story has the basic elements of an exposition, a problem, a series of rising actions, a climax, a series of falling actions, and a conclusion, all of which can be visualized on a diagram to represent the plot of the story. This model was incorporated in a structural diagram for each story in the study. This diagram incorporated Harley's (129–40) concept of manipulating the "fourth wall" as it applies to storytelling.

The "fourth wall" is an imaginary barrier between the audience and the actors in a conventional drama that enables the actors to create the world of the play on the stage, without acknowledging the audience. The term was apparently first mentioned by Andre Antoine (cited in Styan 35) in the early years of the twentieth century, but some scholars attribute it to Diderot in the eighteenth century (Stevenson 4). Harley suggests that the storyteller should manipulate the fourth wall to bring the audience in, or distance them, at relevant sections of the story. When the storyteller is being the narrator, the wall should be down, and the storyteller can make eye contact with listeners and encourage interaction. When characters are being directly presented through dialogue or gesture, the wall should be up, with the storyteller looking in a consistent direction that has been established for that character. Harley (133) contended that by "playing with the wall" in this way, a more intimate atmosphere is created between the storyteller and the listeners.

Room and Audience Preparation and Management

Experienced storytellers know that venue suitability can greatly contribute to the success of a storytelling session (Dudley and McKay 18; Cooper, Collins, and Saxby 36). The classroom

was surveyed during the first few minutes of the session in week 1 and a suitable area assessed very quickly and adopted as the “storytelling area” for each subsequent session. Gathering data for the current research in a systematic method (research question 1) relied on consistently presenting what in storytelling circles is termed “a successful event.”

Each of the classes had an average of twenty-nine students, small enough to maintain the sense of intimacy so crucial to effective storytelling yet large enough so that individuals did not feel exposed. Doherty-Sneddon’s work on intimacy distance (11) influenced my understanding of the need for building rapport. It was crucial that each class become comfortable with me as quickly as possible, in order to engage and participate in the storytelling experience. Doherty-Sneddon stated that every human has an established intimacy relationship with other people that dictates how they will respond using both nonverbal behaviors and verbal communication. The works of the Australian educators Miles and Rogers also provided good material, written with the substitute teacher in mind but easily adaptable to the uses of visiting storytellers.

QUEST Step 3: Data Collection

The data were systematically collected from the observation of body language, verbal responses, and spontaneous dramatization by the research participants as they listened to storytelling. Much of the impact of storytelling comes through facial expression, gesture, and pauses, which is why it is such a powerful tool in building relationships and developing meaning making. Fourteen indicators of growing intimacy, such as increased eye contact, were observed and analyzed as the storytelling program progressed.

The work of Zipes assisted in forming the research protocols: to observe the changes in the children’s responses after sustained exposure to storytelling; to build rapport with the child participants and the classroom teachers; and to enhance familiarity with the storyteller and the activity of storytelling and to facilitate honest responses and feedback.

The first storytelling session (hereafter week 1) with each of the kindergarten-grade class (KG), the third-grade class (3G), and the sixth-grade class (6G) lasted for an hour. This session enabled me to determine the participants' initial level of engagement with storytelling and to provide comparison data for the participants' level of engagement as the project continued. Two stories were told in common to each class.

In weeks 2 to 6, each class had five, fortnightly, hour-long storytelling sessions, comprising three or more stories in each session. The emphasis in this phase of the project was for the children to enjoy the storytelling experience and to become comfortable with various types of storytelling (genres, presentation methods, various props, etc.) and with me.

Overall, the participants shared a total of fifty-eight stories (KG = 19; 3G = 18; 6G = 21). Weeks 1, 2, 4, and 6 only were transcribed from the video recordings. During these focus weeks, a total of thirty-seven stories were shared (KG = 13; 3G = 11; 6G = 13).

I spent a total of forty and a half hours in the school, over a period of five months. There were eighteen hours of actual storytelling, and twenty-two and a half hours were spent with various members of the school staff, either in administrative tasks relating to the project or discussing its progress. Additional hours were spent conversing with students and staff in the school playground during recess and lunch breaks. This casual exchange with students outside the classroom was seen as a legitimate aspect of building rapport and trust between the participants and me.

QUEST Step 4: Reflective Practice

All journeys of discovery involve challenges, and the QUEST method entailed a number of significant challenges in its evolution. The QUEST method recognizes that there are many unexplored aspects of storytelling in the research that currently exists and gives space for querying not only the nature of the unexplored aspect but also the existing solutions and possible innovative solutions. Reflective practice and aspects of action research (Elliott 51) were adopted. An example of how the research required adaption to keep faith with the

overriding principles of the study and how important reflection was at all stages of the study may provide some clarity.

In order to maintain continuity of exposure to different styles of storytelling, across all grades involved in the study, it was necessary to adhere to the weekly schedule of stories. However, adherence to this schedule provided a personal ethical dilemma. One of the first skills that a practicing storyteller should learn is how to “read the audience.” If the storyteller perceives that the audience is not enjoying a story, he or she will change the program of stories to better suit the particular audience. Experienced practising storytellers know to always prepare more stories than are required for any program, so that they can replace one story with another if it would better suit the audience. There were instances in the current study when classes had clearly had enough storytelling for one day or the scheduled story was not appropriate for that particular class. Neither option of replacing a story or halting a storytelling session, except in extreme circumstances, was available to me due to adherence to the schedule. I am unaware of any other research in storytelling that dealt with this issue of adherence to a strict schedule of stories. No model of overcoming this dilemma was available in the research literature; therefore, I resolved to adjust my storytelling presentation techniques to overcome these challenges. Techniques such as metanarration, increased or decreased audience participation, and making repetitive refrains more prominent were all utilized while still adhering to the schedule of stories.

QUEST Step 5: Critical Interrogation of Data

A major innovative aspect of the QUEST method was the application of a data-analysis computer software program (NVivo 9) to investigate data derived from a storytelling research project. The collected data were critically analyzed using grounded theory and involved making best use of the technologies of video recording and qualitative software packages to assist analysis, while still valuing more traditional approaches to gauging response to storytelling such as ideas provided by story circles of storytellers and anecdotal thoughts

from teachers and educators. A lot of the feedback to a story is in features such as the facial expressions, the small sounds children make, and the settling into a sitting position. The methodology needed to be open to a variety of features of engagement.

The question of who was to transcribe the data emerged very quickly and was guided both by ethical considerations and by the complexity of the data to be analyzed. Proponents of grounded theory support the practice of researchers transcribing their own data. Pat Bazeley (one of the creators of the software, originally called NUDIST and now known as NVivo) said, “there is also real value in doing your own transcribing, if at all possible—building knowledge of your data through what Frost and Stablein (1992) referred to as ‘handling your own rat’” (Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo* 44). By handling my own rat (data), the material became even more familiar; aspects that were not apparent at the time of collection became clear, and aspects that needed further teasing out became obvious.

Storytelling is a complex experience shared between a teller and a number of listeners, which involves far more than an exchange of words, and while transcribing what is captured by video footage helps to bridge the meaning gap, it can never do true justice to the actual experience. The limitations of transcribing oral storytelling are compellingly described by the British teacher and storyteller Betty Rosen (71), who pointed out that variations in speech, gestures, and mannerisms and fleeting facial responses are lost in transcription.

Knowledge of this storyteller-listener dynamic was another convincing argument for me to do my own transcribing, but there was still another issue that could not be ignored. Conducting research that involved video recording child participants precluded anyone else assisting with transcribing due to confidentiality issues. It was determined that the sessions would be transcribed solely by me. The data needed to be transcribed in a way that gave the maximum clarity to readers who would not be able to view any of the actual storytelling

sessions. Each of the twelve focus storytelling sessions went through the following two-part transcription process.

In the first-run transcription of the video footage, all the stories were transcribed in their entirety, and all comments made by me and the listeners, including conversations before and after the stories, were transcribed. Screen-dump images of each class were used to aid with coding individual participants, and the class images were labeled accordingly for future reference.

In the second-run transcription, all physical responses, movement around the class, and facial expressions made by each individual participant in each of the sessions was described and included in the transcript. Coding of the participants was checked against the labeled snapshots to ensure continuity of identification. The markers and symbols used for transcription are as follows:

- Teller/researcher (including comments and storytelling narrative/scripts)—plain font
- Participant/listener (children's and teachers') comments—italic font
- Description of physical action or response observed—green font (produced as boldface here), in order to differentiate them from the spoken-word events
- It was decided not to use the label of “Teller” constantly and to put listeners' code names at the end of lines to try to minimize disruption to the flow of the session.

An example of the transcript utilizing the various fonts and markers is provided in figure 1.

1.38.25 Little Half-chick

There was once a Spanish hen,

Bridget looks at Arthur

Perry looks down at floor

and she hatched out a brood of beautiful chicks.

Arthur looks at teller

Bruce puts chin in hands

Bridget looks at teller

Gold and brown and black; all of them lovely; all of them healthy; except for one. And he was a half-chick.

Jarrold sits up straight

Celia has mouth open

Grant frowns

Linda pulls face

He only had one wing,

Matt throws head back

Celia gasps

and one leg,

Bruce gasps

half a head

Oh poor thing—Lennon

Extract from “Little Half-chick,” week 4, 3G

Figure 1. An extract from the research transcript illustrating the transcription markers used

Both expected and unexpected patterns in the data were queried. In this study, the NVivo software supported ground theory in action as it enables data to be classified, sorted, and arranged in a structured way that then allows for queries to be run across the data. Graphs and models were used to indicate the changes in responses to storytelling. The capacity to do this is one of the particular strengths of the NVivo program.

The current study was immersed in story with the responses of the participants entrenched in the context of the stories themselves. The actual stories therefore had to be

incorporated into the transcripts, in order to give meaning to the participants' responses. With regard to narrative research, Yu has stated,

From the very beginning of narrative inquiry, when narrators are invited to tell their particular stories, both narrators and researchers have something at stake in the stories. That is not a natural process of describing what is going on in reality, but a highly selective and creative process of expressing, co-constituting, understanding, and living. (3)

NVivo software has not previously been used as a tool for analyzing any type of storytelling program, and Pat Bazeley was intrigued by its use in this context. Bazeley used the format of the transcripts as devised by me in her book *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies* (80) to illustrate the innovative use of transcription and analysis to reflect not only the verbal but also the physical exchange of responses to stories across different storytelling sessions and subgroups of participants.

QUEST Step 6: Patterns and Results

Patterns of responses in story listening behavior over time were investigated to enhance the understanding of storytelling phenomena. Factors such as listening and conversational manners, spatial relationships, acceptance of other points of view, and verbally expressed empathy for others were noted and analyzed. When the ninety-five different behavior responses (free nodes) identified from the research data were analyzed further in terms of frequency and relevance, twenty-five Indicators of Engagement were identified. These Indicators of Engagement were further grouped into five thematic clusters of engagement: Entering the Story Realm Engagement, Collaborative Engagement, Trancelike State Engagement, Language Engagement, and Group Dynamics Engagement.

NVivo met the analysis needs of the current project extremely well. It enabled the construction of queries that arose from the original research questions and the application of these queries directly to the data. NVivo enabled an analysis of the responses of the

participants individually and in groups (called “Sets” in NVivo) according to class, age, and engagement clusters. Responses could also be analyzed across individual stories, to measure how different age groups engaged with the same story. This level of analysis has not previously been applied to storytelling, possibly due to the fact that without a tool like NVivo, it is an overwhelming task.

It was useful to understand how the coding process involved in NVivo linked to the open coding concept of grounded theory when the researcher begins to analyze the data with no preconceived codes or themes (Glaser, *Basics* 38). As the data is viewed, codes become apparent to the researcher. Strauss and Corbin have succinctly defined the idea of open coding: “Broadly speaking, during open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences” (102). As the discrete part (the concept that is the event or phenomenon) is identified, it is given a representative name. As the data are further analyzed, similar events are assigned the same representative name. Concepts that are linked in meaning are grouped in categories (Glaser, *Basics* 38).

The first set of categories is substantive: conceptual meanings are derived from categories and their properties. These are the initial codes that are identified in data, and in the current research, from the 267 pages of transcripts, every comment or physical gesture made by any of the participants in the selected storytelling sessions was coded as free nodes using open coding. In all, ninety-five codes or categories were created as they became relevant to the material being analyzed, such as “smile at story,” “frown,” or “echo teller’s words.” In NVivo, these were termed “free nodes” or “child nodes.”

The second part of classifying data is theoretical: conceptual models of relationships are built that relate to substantive codes. They are the logical groupings of free nodes that begin to form themes or related concepts, or the connectors between conceptual ideas. In the current study, these were the Indicators of Engagement that consisted of initial codes that had similar relationships or linked in an obvious way. In NVivo, these relationships are called

“tree nodes” or “parent nodes.” By applying the rigor of coding in NVivo, I was forced to look at each response, in each individual story, as a unique element in the data and to assign it a code of its own. This was done without the influence of preconceived ideas about what *should* happen in a story. By using NVivo to build first these sets of free nodes and then tree nodes, I was able to establish which participant responses revealed engagement with the stories. Further, running queries across these nodes showed how levels of engagement develop and thereby enabled me to build theories around the relationship between the clusters of engagement indicators.

The tree nodes became the basis for a chart of Indicators of Engagement and enabled the measurement of the participants’ engagement with story. Using NVivo query capabilities, I was able to determine what responses (coded as nodes) occurred when children were strongly engaged with a story. Figure 2 illustrates the five clusters that formed the Indicators of Engagement and shows how these five clusters formed two distinct strands of engagement: the Individualization Strand and the Relational Effects Strand.

Figure 2
The complete Engagement with storytelling process
revealed through Indicators of Engagement

Figure 2. The complete engagement with storytelling process revealed through Indicators of Engagement

The Indicators of Engagement

The Individualization Strand

Entering the Story Realm

Conversations with all of the students during week 1 established that the majority of the participants believed that they had little or no experience of oral storytelling. The video of this first week revealed that many students certainly had difficulty settling into the role of listener. As the storytelling project continued, however, the video data revealed that each listener adopted his or her own means of entering the story realm. For some students, it involved finding a comfortable posture. Others moved closer to the front. Some of the youngest participants put their thumb in their mouth, while other children visibly relaxed. For all listeners, Entering the Story Realm was accompanied by looking at me within the first few minutes of a story. Across all three classes, the time to Enter the Story Realm was reduced as the project progressed.

Distinct patterns for Exiting the Story Realm also became a noticeable behavior across the three classes. For the kindergarten students, physically moving around after focusing on a story, making comments about the story, and adding their own spin to it became common. For example, students in the third class demonstrated their Exit of the Story Realm by wriggling, looking at classmates, smiling, or applauding. As the project continued, several children in this class became so immersed in the stories that they wanted to relive or repeat certain sections of a story, as though they were reluctant to leave the story realm.

The most dramatic change in engagement behavior was displayed by the sixth-grade class, who had been labeled by numerous teachers as the “worst class” in the entire school. From a very disruptive beginning in week 1, as the project continued, they urged their classmates to settle in quickly, moved closer together, faced the front, and displayed active but attentive listening. Their changing behavior toward the end of the project was most startling, however, as this formerly disruptive class responded to the conclusion of numerous stories

with quiet reflection, often followed by perceptive questions about the motivation or actions of characters.

Collaborative Engagement

The Collaborative Engagement indicators were developed from Sipe's term "performative engagement" (476–77). The indicators that emerged during the storytelling project described the participatory actions that the students displayed while listening to a story. There were twenty-one indicators identified from the data; however, the five indicators in the Collaborative Engagement cluster were the ones that occurred most frequently. Talking over text (usually only uttering one word but sometimes a lengthy phrase) was the most common indicator and was the one that the teachers (including casual or visiting teachers) had the biggest problem with. For the teachers, it was a sign that the student was being disruptive, rather than being engaged.

The third-grade class eagerly embraced the storytelling sessions from week 1. This may have been an age-related response, in that storytelling was a welcome change from regular classwork and was still seen as a cool activity, or the eagerness may have been led by the extremely vocal Perry (all participants' names are pseudonyms). My encouraging response of smiling and nodding at Perry's participation assured his classmates that collaborating in the stories was acceptable. The indicator of Joining In was exceptionally high during week 1 but fell in subsequent weeks. By using the QUEST method, it became evident that Perry and therefore many of his classmates realized that there were other ways of collaborating in a story other than calling out or talking over text.

All of the Collaborative Engagement cluster indicators showed a significant increase for the sixth grade that changed from disruptive interjection to being solely in response to the story being told. Kindergarten participants likewise displayed a continuous increase in the Collaborative Engagement indicators as they became more familiar and comfortable with the concept of storytelling and this regular visitor to their classroom.

Trancelike State Engagement

Practicing storytellers often describe with delight how a particular audience became “entranced” in a story. I was interested to observe whether this phenomena would occur during the project. My observations indicated that the Trancelike State begins to occur only when a listener has become familiar with the experience of storytelling, with the great majority of occurrences being observed in the later sessions of the project. The data also revealed that, during this project at least, the Trancelike State occurred only during stories that were told in the traditional manner, that is, using only voice and gesture. In this study, stories that were accompanied by various props or overt audience participation appeared to “disrupt the trance” for listeners. This observation is worthy of further investigation and research. As listeners were able to easily enter into the story realm, instances of disruption or distraction lessened, and they were more readily able to respond collaboratively. This ability further led to more of the students being able to slip into a trancelike state when the story or the school environment provided very few distractions.

Relational Effects Strand

Analysis of the data revealed that as the students displayed consistent instances of the three clusters previously discussed, they progressed from solely individual collaboration with the storyteller to collaboration within the group in a shared response to the stories.

Language Engagement

The work of Grainger (27–45) contributed to the formulation of the Language Engagement cluster. It was noted that as the storytelling project continued, the verbal responses to stories (not merely talking over text) became more frequent and articulate. This was particularly so in the later sessions when participants spontaneously discussed the tale just heard and was common across all three classes. The indicators in this cluster revealed a developing recognition of the components that make up a story (Amaro and Moreira 1–17) and also highlighted the language benefits that a prolonged program of storytelling can bring to

children. There was a spike in the indicators in this cluster across all three classes in week 4. This can be attributed to two factors: the participants were becoming increasingly familiar with the structure of stories and were acquiring a vocabulary through conversation before and after each story with which to articulate their thoughts; the presentation of stories was enhanced by the adoption of Harley's concept of the fourth wall principle in story preparation and presentation (129–40).

The students in the kindergarten class showed a significant increase in occurrences in this cluster, going from nine instances in week 1 to sixty-one instances in week 6. These young listeners became increasingly willing to express their views about the stories as the project continued and revealed the individual meaning that they were beginning to find in the stories. Of particular interest with this class was their ability to utilize their experience with other media to notice similarities in the stories they heard and express these comparisons in an increasingly effective way.

The raw data for the third grade showed a substantial increase in the Language Engagement indicators, from forty-four to seventy-one occurrences from week 1 to week 6. However, utilizing the QUEST method of querying this result showed that many of the occurrences during week 1 were motivated by a spirit of competition, rather than a true prediction of what was to happen. The more accurate figure in week 1 then became twenty-one, and the progress made in this engagement cluster became much more significant. Likewise, the ability to critique a story not only increased in occurrences but also became more meaningful, changing from abrupt and barely on topic to more focused, articulate, and relevant.

The ability of the students in the sixth grade to critique a story in meaningful ways, to identify a known or similar story, and to predict the plot of a story were all heightened during the project, as revealed by zero instances in week 1 and fifty-one occurrences in week 6. It

was very satisfying to observe the increasingly sophisticated verbal responses from this allegedly “worst class in the school.”

Group Dynamics Engagement

The kindergarten class showed positive group dynamics from week 1, but even this class, which had a teacher who often told them stories, showed an increase in occurrences across the cluster, with occurrences doubling from week 1 to week 6. Any classroom modification displayed by the students was gentle and nonverbal, which may be a reflection of the techniques used by the teacher. An example of improved group dynamics was displayed by Tiri, who was quite distracted in week 1 but over the course of the project became one of the most avid and collaborative of listeners. He became a student who displayed concern if a story was delayed or interrupted by the behavior of another.

The data for the third grade was extremely scattered and revealed no logical pattern in the indicator occurrences for this cluster. While there was an increase from week 1 to week 6, the highest number of incidences occurred in week 2. A deeper analysis of the data revealed several factors that accounted for the spike in numbers. The classroom teacher had been very disappointed in the students' behavior in week 1 and had reprimanded them. This resulted in many students in the class correcting perceived poor behavior in week 2. As the class became more familiar with storytelling and acceptable levels of interaction, they settled into the stories much more quickly, and the behavior modification was required less in the later weeks. Further, as the project continued, the video data revealed that students were not only sitting closer together but also sitting further away from students who were often disruptive during the stories.

It was revealed only after the storytelling project had ceased that the assistant principal had specifically selected the “worst class in the school” to be the participating sixth-grade class, in anticipation of the change that a long-term storytelling program would have on the behavior and group dynamics. The raw data of zero occurrences in week 1 to eighty-three

occurrences in week 6 certainly appeared to vindicate a belief that storytelling could build and enhance communities (Zipes). Interrogation of the data revealed an even more significant growth in this engagement cluster, however. One student, Sylvia, who was ostracized by her classmates at the beginning of the project, by week 6 was not only sitting in the middle of a group of girls during the storytelling session but also exchanging smiles and positive responses with the class.

Conclusion

For the first research question—What is an appropriate, academically rigorous methodology for investigating engagement with storytelling?—a means of closely observing and thereafter analyzing the multiple interactions that take place during a storytelling event was required.

This method needed to have the capacity to analyze the constantly adapting interplay between the storyteller and the story listener, between the story listener and the story itself, and between the individual story listener and his or her classmates. Action research using a grounded theory approach was identified as the research method best suited to such a study.

The QUEST method, described in this paper, provides storytelling researchers with a replicable means of querying unexplored aspects of storytelling in a structured manner. The QUEST method enables the storyteller to develop a three-dimensional understanding of the storytelling event, linking data collected on body language, verbal responses, common emotional indicators, and responses directed at other members of the audience as well as to the storyteller (and responses from the storyteller and community members associated with the storytelling event) to the narratives and storytelling practices themselves.

The research conducted in response to the second research question—How can children's engagement with storytelling be defined and measured?—as described in this paper was able to demonstrate that the use of the measurement tool of the Indicators of Engagement enables storytellers and researchers to observe and measure in a consistent manner the way in which listeners engage with storytelling.

While this method has been applied to a primary-aged audience, it has applications for listeners of all ages and could feasibly be utilized in the analysis of the effect of storytelling in the tertiary sector and organizational storytelling.

The third research question—How do children experience story, on the basis of observable, behavioral cues?—goes to the essence of the storytelling event itself. Practicing storytellers know that a storytelling session or program will never go completely as planned. The very nature of the storytelling activity predicts that a story listener will not always embrace the meaning of a story that the teller wishes to impart or respond in the expected way. The Indicators of Engagement provide storytellers with a pathway from which they can observe the rocky terrain of the storytelling event, littered with possible pitfalls and unexpected behaviors and responses.

The application of grounded theory, open coding, and qualitative analysis software, as well as storytelling lore and practice, has enabled an “open-minded” systematic research process, couched in academically rigorous terms to be conducted on an age-old activity. Any storyteller who wished to carry out similar research would be able to select stories that had meaning and resonance for them.

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Notes

1. The first author is the storyteller and writes from the storyteller's perspective.
2. The ten-step storytelling process used in this research is available from the corresponding author by request.

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