

Teaching Techniques

Teaching Through Stories

Stephen C. Goodwin, Andrew P. Jenkins

Topic

Teaching Through Stories

Activities and Strategies

Accepting responsibility for one's actions represents one important goal of health education. The importance of accepting responsibility, respecting others, and working together are themes often found in stories for children and adults, as well as in fables, myths, and legends. These concepts are important when teaching units on sexuality, substance use, self-esteem, and other content areas of the health curriculum.

Lessons using stories, fables, myths, and legends have an advantage because they can deal with complex issues concisely.¹ Further, students likely will remember these lessons better than many others.² This fact is evidenced by viewing societies such as Native Americans who, while not using written words, passed on their history through stories. Consequently, teachers can add breadth and depth to classes by incorporating stories into lessons.

Stories. Stories are useful for teachers interested in having students explore the motivation behind a character's decision, and not just the decision itself. This type of analysis is possible because details of the character's past experiences and personality traits often are presented. For example, O. Henry's "Ransom of Red Chief"³ can be used to examine parenting skills. When presenting a unit on the environment, Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* is ideal. And *A Fuzzy Tale* was written by the Idaho State Health Education Department specifically to help student's examine the importance of treating each other with respect and how society can be afflicted by selfishness. Regardless of one's religious beliefs, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*⁴ is excellent for examining the need to take responsibility for one's behavior and treating people with respect.

Fables. Fables are brief, easily read, and followed by a maxim.⁵ This arrangement allows teachers to approach the lesson in various ways. For example, the fable can be read, and the class can be asked to cite the moral of the story. When employing this method, students generally cite a moral similar to the author's. However, the opinions of author and student may vary. This difference should be viewed positively since students form opinions based on their experiences. When differences occur, ask students how they reached their conclusion. After exploring the moral proposed by the student, refocus the

Lesson Objectives

Objectives for each lesson depend on the story, fable, myth, or legend selected. Further, the age, maturity, and abilities of students dictate which objectives are most appropriate for a lesson. The activities will:

1. Improve students' understanding of complex social issues.
2. Help students develop decision-making skills through analysis of the characters' actions.
3. Enable students to understand the emotional involvement resulting from their decisions.
4. Provide a means for students to practice synthesizing material presented in the stories.

Assessment Criteria

Assessment depends on the strategy determined most appropriate for the teacher's class.

1. When students analyze a character's behavior, could they identify the major factors influencing their behavior or decisions?
2. When discussing the story, could students analyze and synthesize the information presented in terms of the current social environment?
3. When writing a story, could students present concepts relevant to the situation?

Stephen C. Goodwin, PhD, Assistant Professor, CSB, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716; and Andrew P. Jenkins, PhD, Associate Professor, Health Education Programs, Central Washington University, Ellensburg, WA 98926. This article was submitted November 20, 1996, and revised and accepted for publication May 28, 1997.

discussion on the moral intended by the author.

Another option that promotes creativity and writing involves providing the maxim to the class and have them (as individuals, small groups, or as a whole) write a fable or story illustrating the concept stated in the maxim. Encourage students to write stories to reflect current events occurring in their lives. This process provides an opportunity to learn how students perceive events occurring in their lives. After reading the students' responses, some (or all) should be shared with the class. The stories chosen should emphasize what the teacher wanted students to learn.

"The Young Rooster," by Arnold Lobel⁶

A young Rooster was summoned to his Father's bedside.

"Son, my time has come to an end," said the aged bird. "Now it is your turn to crow up the morning sun each day."

The young Rooster watched sadly as his Father's life slipped away.

Early the next morning, the young Rooster flew up to the roof of the barn. He stood there, facing the east.

"I have never done this before," said the Rooster. "I must try my best." He lifted his head and crowed. A weak and scratch croak was the only sound he was able to make.

The sun did not come up. Clouds covered the sky, and a damp drizzle fell all day. All of the animals of the farm came to the Rooster.

"This is a disaster!" cried a Pig.

"We need our sunshine!" shouted a Sheep.

"Rooster, you must crow much louder," said a Bull. "The sun is ninety-three million miles away. How do you expect it to hear you?"

Very early the next morning, the young Rooster flew up to the roof of the barn again. He took a deep breath, he threw back his head and CROWED. It was the loudest crow that was ever crowed since the beginning of roosters.

The animals on the farm were awakened from their sleep with a start.

"What a noise!" cried the Pig.

"My ears hurt!" shouted the Sheep.

"My head is splitting!" said the Bull.

"I am sorry," said the Rooster, "but I was only doing my job."

He said this with a great deal of pride, for he saw, far to the east, the tip of the morning sun coming up over the trees.

This fable teaches that a first failure may prepare the way for later success.

Myths and Legends. These can be great to use in concert with English and social studies classes. One of the most interesting sources of stories comes from Native Americans. The book *Myths and Legends of the Sioux*, by Marie L. McLaughlin,⁷ has a great number of Sioux myths that can be used very effectively in the classroom. A good example from this book is "The Little Mice." This story can be used to help the students examine the importance of hard work and taking responsibility for one's decisions. Another story from this collection, "The Simpleton's Wisdom," is a tale of how a simpleton helps a grieving mother overcome her suicidal thoughts. This story is excellent for a unit on suicide on death and dying.

"A Native American Legend"

Many years ago, Indian braves would go away in solitude to prepare for manhood. One hiked into a beautiful valley, green with trees, bright with flowers. There as he looked up at the surrounding mountains, he noticed one rugged peak, capped with dazzling snow.

"I will test myself against that mountain," he thought. He put on his buffalo-hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulders, and set off to climb the pinnacle.

When he reached the top, he stood on the rim of the world. He could see forever, and his heart swelled with pride. Then he heard a rustle at his feet. Looking down, he saw a snake. Before he could move the snake spoke.

"I am about to die," said the snake. "It is too cold for me up here, and there is no food. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley."

"No," said the youth. "I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up you will bite and your bite will kill me."

"Not so," said the snake. "I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, I will not harm you."

The youth resisted awhile, but this was a very persuasive snake. At last the youth tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it down gently. Suddenly the snake coiled, rattled and struck, biting him on the leg.

"But you promised —" cried the youth.

"You knew what I was when you picked me up," said the snake as it slithered away.

This story can be used effectively in a drug education unit by emphasizing drugs are like the snake. It is also a good story to illustrate the "It won't happen to me, I'm different" attitude.

Grade Level and Subject Area

Stories, fables, myths, and legends can be used at any grade level, depending on the students' abilities and maturity. Stories can be used for units on drug, sexuality, death and dying, and decision-making.

Resources and Materials

An abundance of literature and stories are available to teachers. School libraries can be helpful in finding age-appropriate stories for health education lessons.⁸ Two Web sites for stories are: <http://appcity.com/Kids/stories>, and <http://web.maxwell.syr.edu/nativeweb/nativeweb/natlit/Nalit.html>. ■

References

1. Thompson L. Storytelling — knowing: the power of stories. In: Dreyer PH, ed. *55th Yearbook of the Claremont Reading Conference: Knowing: The Power of Stories*. Claremont, Calif; 1991:40-51.
2. Barton B, Booth D. *Stories in the Classroom: Storytelling, Reading Aloud and Role-Playing with Children*. Markham, Ontario: Pembroke

Publishers, Ltd; 1990.

3. Henry O. *The Complete Works of O. Henry*. Garden City, NJ: Garden City Publishing Co; 1936.

4. Dickens C. *A Christmas Carol*. Cumberland House Wordsworth Editions Ltd; 1993.

5. *The Fables of Aesop*. New York, NY: Weatherlane Books; 1985.

6. Lobel A. *Fables*. Mexico: HarperCollins Publishers; 1980.

7. McLaughlin ML, eds. *Myths and Legends of the Sioux*. Lincoln, Neb: Bison Book, University of Nebraska Press; 1990.

8. Britton JN. *Language and Learning*. London, England: Allen Lane the Penguin Press; 1970.

Children's Safety Network Offers New Guide -- The Children's Safety Network now offers a resource packet, *Injuries in the School Environment (Second Edition)*, to inform school personnel, injury prevention professionals, parents, and others about the problem of injuries in the school environment and to stimulate dialogue about the possible solutions. Included are fact sheets on understanding the problem; a series of vignettes to examine the circumstances; selected examples of how agencies in nine states address the problem; sample data collection forms; and an annotated bibliography of resources, journal articles studies and government reports. Primary authors of this guide are Susan Gallagher, Alison Dana, Anara Guard.

Published by the CSN Education Development Center, Inc., the guide is available free of charge from Michelle Stober, Children's Safety Network, Education Development Center, Inc., 55 Chapel St., Newton, MA 02158-1060; 617/969-7100, ext. 2207. Its World Wide Web access is www.ed.org/HHD/csn/schoolinj/schoolpack.html.

The CSN is funded by the federal Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Bureau and consists of six sites that provide technical assistance to state and local public health professionals, especially those serving MCH populations. The National Injury and Violence Prevention Resource Center at Education Development Center, Inc., which developed the guide, is one of these six sites.

Teach the Right Stuff

Help your students achieve their personal best with Fit to Play, a new educational video kit produced in cooperation with the U.S. Olympic Committee.

Fit to Play combines fun, easy-to-use tools to teach students, ages 9 to 14, about good nutrition, physical activity and keeping a positive attitude. Uniquely developed to focus on students individually, Fit to Play stresses individual goal setting, striving to be your personal best and having fun.



Designed to be flexible and interactive, the kit's components—an entertaining 16-minute video, instructor's guide, lesson plans, reproducible handouts, references and more—can be used individually or as a unit. Get accurate, actionable nutrition and fitness information with a focus on having fun and making positive lifestyle choices. To order Fit to Play at \$30 each send your checks to The Sugar Association, 1101 15th St., NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005.



"Finally, an entertaining video with practical messages about nutrition and fitness."

Ann C. Grandjean, Ed.D
Director, The Center for Human Nutrition