Connecting cultures through stories

By Nabanita Deshmukh | Jan 28, 2015

Telling a story the 'right' way can make all the difference. Nabanita shares here some aspects teachers need to consider to make the most of their story-telling sessions.

Storytelling is not simply an entertaining activity used by grandmothers to tuck children to bed. It has assumed an important role in classrooms and is now regarded as a necessary learning tool. A child not only learns a new language by listening to stories but other parts of his or her personality get developed as well. Furthermore, stories stimulate children’s imagination, improve their concentration, and instil in them the love of reading and creative writing. Listening to stories also develops language skills such as vocabulary, comprehension, sequencing, and recalling.

Stories about other cultures

Stories are used in classrooms around the world to teach language and subjects like geography and history. What kind of stories does a teacher choose? Should one select tales from unfamiliar surroundings? What are the benefits of cross-cultural storytelling in a language class? These are some questions that teachers often find difficult to answer. I’ve found that many teachers are often sceptical of the benefits of narrating stories from other cultures.

“I rarely narrate North-Indian stories to my students because we cannot understand that culture,” commented a teacher during one of our storytelling workshops in Kerala, a few years ago.

A teacher from Delhi I recently met complained that stories where dishes like ‘avial’ (mixed vegetable curry), ‘meen kodambu’ (type of fish curry) and ‘sambar’ figured were not relevant for her class. “My students do not like South Indian food, so why waste time narrating these tales?” she bluntly asked.

Do stories from other cultures demotivate our students or do they, in fact, instil in them a sense of curiosity about people and places that are very different from their own? Listening and telling stories from other cultures help develop and promote better understanding, respect, appreciation and a more positive outlook towards people from different lands, races and religions... and even one's own! In brief, these stories help us:

- Explore our multi-cultural roots
- Undergo different kinds of cultural experiences and gain insights into different traditions and values
- Develop empathy towards unfamiliar people, places or situations
- Get to know about the differences and similarities of various cultures and be introduced to new ideas that were previously unknown to us.

Given that these are the benefits of cross-cultural storytelling, let me share with you some ways to make your story-telling sessions more relevant and effective. For stories from different cultures to have their maximum effect on the listeners, the narrator must keep a few factors in mind. Lack of knowledge of the story background, strong reactions to cultural practices and convictions, use of gory or violent details in the narration, inappropriate behaviour and intolerance of other’s beliefs or convictions make the story unappealing to the children and it loses its efficacy. How to narrate stories in a sensitive manner is a question often asked by teachers and below are a few useful tips:

Setting the stage

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A storyteller was once narrating an adivasi story to a group of urban school children. The story's setting was in the remote Eastern Ghats region of south western Odisha. The protagonist of the tale was a fiery tribal woman called Premsila. The climate in those hilly parts swung to extremes, freezing in winter and sizzling in summer. Premsila's hut was low with just one opening at the front and the smoke from her earthen choolah filled the air. Every day she went up to the hills to collect tubers and seeds that were the staple food of her community – the Kondhs.

The storyteller straightaway launched into the story and the children looked quite lost. They could not identify with the protagonist nor could they visualise the story setting. The storyteller did not use any pre-telling activity or pictures to educate the listeners on Premsila's tribe and the kind of lives they lead. The events of the story were so far removed from the urban reality that most of the children who had gathered around the storyteller lost interest and were soon distracted.

As a storyteller, try to capture the attention of the children by finding out more about the location of where the story is set or originates from, the characters – their food habits, costumes, beliefs, habitat etc., and other characteristics like physical appearance, and their psychological make-up. These snippets of information could be used as pre-telling activities where students are gradually introduced to the story for better comprehension. In Premsila's case, a picture or photo of the tribesmen in their traditional costumes near their respective huts in the backdrop of the hills would have been helpful.

Judgement

A storyteller who was a staunch vegetarian went to a tribal area to tell stories to school children. Every time she spoke of meat, she crinkled her nose or frowned. She even remarked, "Oh, how disgusting it is to kill animals and eat their meat."

What the 'vegetarian storyteller' did not realise was that her audience was made up of tribal children whose parents often hunted and ate small birds and rodents. In fact, meat was their staple diet and in this case, would it not have been better if the storyteller had avoided strong reactions that showed her ignorance of the community and their customs?

In another instance, a priest held a storytelling session with a group of sprightly adivasi children in a village. Seeing a log of wood being worshipped as the presiding deity, he could not help passing a few derogatory comments that did not go well with the audience. How do you think the holy man should have reacted on seeing the object of worship that was a mere log? A little bit of sensitivity towards the culture and beliefs of his audience would have ensured deeper bonding between the storyteller and his audience.

Suitability of content

'The king's men slaughtered the enemy as if they were mere rabbits. Blood oozed like fountains, and now, a few days later, the entrails of the soldiers were exposed and a foul stench emanated from corpses. Vultures had already begun pecking out the eyes and tongues of the dead men and the entire battle field was strewn with headless and limbless men in torn uniform...'

A storyteller began this story with a group of very young children never once looking up at them to gauge their reactions. The children cringed at the mention of 'blood', 'pecking out the eyes', 'limbless men' and 'entrails'. What do you think the storyteller could have done differently? Instead of describing the brutal details of a battle in a story, the storyteller could have perhaps said:

'A fierce battle took place between the King's men and the enemy. The enemy lost many lives and the battlefield was littered with bodies of soldiers who had died fighting. (Describe the battlefield by using gestures and modulate your voice to mimic war cries).

The minds of young children are in the process of developing. As teachers, it is best to share with them a taste of the refined and the beautiful and reveal gently the ugly or the violent. The use of gestures, mimes, sound effects and other visualisation techniques help children imagine a story in their own manner. By down-playing the gory, unpleasant details that adults are more equipped to handle, you can ensure that the stories have a beneficial impact on the children.

Appropriate behaviour

A village teacher visited an urban school and was asked to narrate a folktale. The enthusiastic man chewed betel leaf and spat through the window every time he reached an interesting part in the story. How do you think the students reacted? Most of them giggled and paid more attention to the behaviour of the storyteller than to the story.

Appropriate behaviour and mannerisms go a long way in making the storytelling experience worthwhile. Why do anything while telling a story that distracts the audience and diminishes their experience? Children respond well when storytellers give them respect. As a mark of respect, to the audience, however young they may be, it is best not to sit with one's legs up on the table or talk condescendingly to them. Are they finding the content engaging? Has the story given rise to questions? As a teacher and story-teller, one must pay attention to the audience and make time to discuss their thoughts and responses.

Guarding against conveying unintended messages

Speaking of popular stories, teachers often use fairy tales like Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, Snow White etc... This may however be problematic if the storyteller is not aware of the cultural implications, and the messages that are often sub-consciously conveyed.

I remember once recounting the story of 'The Three Little Pigs' to a group of poor village children. As I came to the part where the bad wolf blows away the thatched roof of the first pig, one small boy began to cringe. On enquiring what was wrong, he said, "But we all live in thatched houses and ours will be the first to get blown away if the bad wolf comes!"

The child had identified himself with the first little pig and for him the bad wolf was a living villain. The child's words made me pause and reflect on why, as storytellers, we need to learn to use even popular stories carefully. Small changes to will go a long way in making popular stories relevant and interesting for children.
Culture-sensitiveness is an important aspect of storytelling. It is therefore crucial for teacher-storytellers to develop this ability to be able to bond with children of different backgrounds and enable them to better understand different cultures as well. It will not only make our storytelling sessions more interesting and informative but will also help the teacher and the students become more understanding of different castes, communities and cultures.

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