Storytelling: Sharing a Culture, Keeping Traditions, Learning a Language

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Abstract

Storytelling is an integral part of our heritage. For many, storytelling is our first exposure to language and culture. These stories and the act of storytelling help us frame our identity.

The use of storytelling as a teaching tool is a fun way to engage students in ASL language development while sharing a valued piece of Deaf culture. In guiding students and mentees through the components of effective storytelling, we share the application of linguistic components such as meaning, cohesion, language markers and affect. Likewise, through incorporating plot, character development, and emotion, students gain insight to native-like cues and back-channeling techniques required for effective ASL discourse.

Keywords: culture, language development, identity, instruction, storytelling, traditions

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I am a Heritage Signer or CODA, Child of Deaf Adults. My degree is in social services with a focus in communication and relationships and I have been a professional interpreter since 2000. In 2012 I attended the mentor training offered through GURIEC in Washington, DC, and have presented workshops on topics from self-care for interpreters to cognitive processing across the country, most recently in partnership with the Interpreter Education Project in Florida through a grant with University of North Florida. In 2016, Sorenson Communications launched an education program for Heritage Signers through the VRS Interpreting Institute. This program focuses on bridging the gap between the language brokering skills CODAs learn and the skills needed for success in interpreting. Participants move through a four-phase program taking them from language basics, fundamental interpreting instruction, mentoring, and connection to the interpreting community at large. In 2015, Deaf-parented members of management with Sorenson VRS participated in the creation of this program, a first of its kind, created by CODAs for CODAs. As a member of the core team, I worked in partnership with Carol Patrie, PhD to develop the lessons plans used with the first cohort. Instruction during this phase centred around four concepts: Culture, Communication, Critical Thinking and Competency. My previous experience working with mentees and presenting workshops at various interpreting conferences, as well as my personal experiences as an actor/storyteller and CODA birthed the notion of using the skills involved in the process of storytelling as a vehicle for instruction.

A Beneficial Tool in Interpreter Education

Storytelling is an integral part of our heritage and for most is our first exposure to our language, our culture, and can help us frame our identity. Most of us can remember listening to or watching a story when we were young. If you think back, you may even recall the specific storyteller, the characters, and the adventures those characters went on, and even the sights and sounds associated with the storytelling experience. Through those stories, we all transported into the adventure; we were also learning. In his research, Abrahamson (1998) shares that stories impart lessons on appropriate social behaviour, expectations, and historical facts. They expose the listener to vocabulary and the nuances of communication and engage our senses by taking us through shared emotions. From a young age, we learn to engage and listen, we learn about ourselves and about others, and we practice by sharing those stories or telling stories of our own.

Ideally, interpreting students have a strong command of ASL vocabulary and are comfortable sharing ideas in ASL. Walking through storytelling exercises provides opportunity to enhance this basic understanding through incorporating advanced language features in order for students to engage their audience. Teachers and mentors can introduce the deliberate practice of lexical substitution, help students identify common language markers, highlight the importance of message cohesion, and explore character development through affect and constructed action. As students incorporate each of these features in their work, they move from storytelling to story showing.
providing them routinization of skills necessary effective ASL discourse. As engaged audience members, students also have the opportunity to observe and apply backchanneling skills that translate into native-like cues for turn taking and effective communication.

**Sharing a Culture**

Storytelling is a common form of entertainment and information sharing around the globe. Through these stories, elders share traditions, life-skills, historical events, and highlight cultural beliefs and development. For many cultures, storytelling predate other oral traditions and is the main way to share cultural norms and expectations. (Zabel, 1991)

In the earliest of times, prior to the advent of writing, storytelling was the only tool available by which individuals within their communities could preserve and share their heritage. Stories not only explained life and preserved history, but also ensured the continuity of experiences from one generation to the next. Civilizations survived because of storytelling. (Abrahamson, 1998)

Cultures around the world from the Pacific Rim to the Appalachian communities in the Carolinas share stories in intimate language to preserve the histories of their people. Children and adults alike gather around storytellers to hear adventures of their favourite heroes or heroines, the humorous catastrophes that befall the villains, and dream of a future where their life mirrors the lives of the protagonist. As the story unfolds, the audience travels through life experiences they may not go through personally, gaining greater understanding of social connections and interactions. The traditional practice of a bedtime story in North Carolina communities shows a model for sharing their “ways of thinking, believing, valuing and using various symbols, tools, and objects.” (Clark & Hayward, 2013, p. 75)

In Granny Sue’s telling of the classic tale of Cinderella, (see Figure 1), Susannah Holstein uses an Appalachian literary device of rearranging consonants to engage her audience and add humour to the fable. Listeners become entranced by the language used and stay focused on the character experiences and the moral of the story, “If you wanna catch yourself a prandsome hince, all you have to do is slop your dripper.” (Holstein, 2014) In this example, the “h” sound of handsome and the “pr” sound of prince are transposed for humour. This occurs throughout the storytelling.

**Figure 1**

![Poor Cinderella, she had to do all the dirty work and those two sister step-uglies all](https://youtu.be/FBnPwn3l6-s)
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Singer/songwriter Amy Carol Webb is a folktale artist from Oklahoma. Webb translates the stories of her Native American heritage into folksongs performed at music festivals across the country. In the song, I Come From Women, (Songweaver, 1998), her lyrics narrate the history of women in her family tree and the musical composition serves as a secondary literary device to convey emotion, mood, and physical experience. Webb uses the syncopation of the guitar and percussion to carry the listener along a long, worn trail walked by her ancestors. (See figure 2) The downbeat of the guitar melody simulates the drums of the Cherokee and Choctaw tribes she learned about from her grandmother. This beat draws the listener in and creates a shared experience between teller and audience allowing for information sharing and deeper understanding of cultural history.

We find these same impacts of storytelling throughout history in the Deaf community. Thanks to archives kept by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), we can document a history that goes back to the turn of the 20th century with signed performances captured as early as 1910. “As long as Deaf people have congregated in schools, clubs, and homes, they have passed down cultural patterns, values, and beliefs in the DEAF WORLD from one generation to the next in something very much like an oral tradition.” (Bahan, 2006, p. 21) My father, now 79 years old, often retells stories he learned during his childhood from older Deaf students at school. As a young boy who lost his hearing at the age of four, he was immediately plunged into a home life where communication was limited. His family spoke no English and had no knowledge of signed languages so communication in the home was limited to gestures. He attended residential schools through High School where he learned English and American Sign Language (ASL). His very first introduction to ASL was during recess around a park bench with five other boys his age paying close attention to an older boy tell the story of what happened to a student who did not follow the rules. My father later learned this was a fictional tale intended to keep the younger boys from snitching on the older boys to the nuns who ran the dorms and admitted he retold the same tale when he was of age with a new group of students starting in the fall. The passing down of stories offers a sense of identity and belonging. Through this rich history, Deaf people develop a stronger command of signing skills and share ways of navigating the hearing world passing on those critical tools to future generations. (Sutton-Spence, 2010)

Much like Granny Sue’s use of literary devices to capture her audience’s attention, ASL storytellers also incorporate linguistic features into their storytelling styles. Holstein applied constraints of trading starting consonants for nouns, verbs, and adjectives in the tale of Cinderella while keeping all other devices in place. This allowed for cohesion of the story and ease of comprehension once the listener understood the manipulated parameter. ASL stories incorporate similar constraints in handshape stories such as ABC stories and number stories, or stories limited to specified handshapes. Once the audience understands the parameters set by the teller, they are attentive not only to the story, but to the teller’s ability to follow those set parameters (e.g. numerical sequence, palm orientation). In their discussion of Language as Art, Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney share this example of a numerical story. “A clever, short, sharp, slap story, “Got it?!”, starts with the sign for “hey you” made with a 1 handshape, followed by LOOK-AT-ME with the 2 handshape, TERRIBLE-LOUSY with the 3 handshape, and continues up to 11 where it ends with GOT-IT?!” (2005, p.185).

Rhythm is another device used by Deaf storytellers to engage their audience. Classifier stories consist entirely, or almost entirely of classifiers. A Classifier is a specific handshape used to represent an object; for example, the 3 handshape can be used to represent a vehicle. By manipulating the location, orientation, and movement of this handshape, a signer can describe a car driving by (Valli, et al., 2005) The teller involves the manipulation of rhythm as the story shifts across various kinds of classifiers. (Bahan, 2006) The young driver driving the car down a winding, bumpy road as passers-by move their heads in time to the bumps and curves evokes the same draw as the percussive beat in Amy Carol Webb’s tale of tribal women’s suffrage.

Developing Identity

As language learners and potential future interpreters, students learn how to recognize and participate in Deaf culture through exposure to storytellers and practice in storytelling techniques used in the community. Much like Deaf individuals learn the nuances of language and social communication in a way that benefits their experiences in the world, interpreting students can apply these same skills in interpreting and cultural mediation. Through following steps taken by native signers, the exposure and retelling of stories, students may incorporate the same benefits of advanced language comprehension and production, participant engagement, and shared experiences.
with their student cohort. Each of these skills are necessary, in addition to the fundamentals of interpreting between two languages, for effective communication between Deaf and hearing participants in a conversation. Before encouraging students to create their own stories, teachers can expose them to ASL stories by inviting storytellers to the classroom and by referencing material available on the internet. This video clip shares information about the impact of stories in Deaf culture and the classic Deaf Tree story. (See figure 2)

Incorporating Storytelling in the Classroom

The first iteration of Storytelling as a tool for instruction took place with the 2016 cohort of the COMPASS program with the VRSII. Participants applied from across the country and represented Heritage Signers with varying degrees of experience in language brokering and basic interpreting. Instruction revolved around the concepts of Culture, Communication, Critical Thinking and Competency and the Storytelling activities combined themes from Culture and Communication. This group of students also learned identifying characteristics of being a CODA and these ideas showed up in their final stories. Participants were encouraged to explore techniques in both ASL and English and create a final story that best represented their identity. Through the process, students practiced language development skills introduced through The Effective Interpreting Series by Patrie (e.g. visual form, lexical substitution, paraphrasing) in order to routinize those skills and enhance their stories.

The parameters of the assignment included five steps: Finding ideas, Choosing characters, Creating character empathy, Identify the conflict, and Follow the storyline. To construct the storyline, students followed the Story Spine technique developed by Kenn Adams and made popular by Pixar. (See figure 3) In the example, you will note the prompt “because of that…” repeated several times, this technique allows the teller to create interest and create the entranced follow through to the end of the story. As the writer considers the “because of that…” prompt, it opens the opportunity for emotional triggers and memories to be included in the story. The subtle difference between “because of that…,” and “after that…,” inspire the why behind a story and prevent it from becoming a list of details. In the story The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy hit her head while hiding from a tornado and dreamed she killed the Wicked Witch of the West in the Land of Oz while trying to get back home to Kansas. This list of details does give us the gist of the story, but it is very different from the fantastical adventures she had along
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her way. Because the munchkins told Dorothy to “follow the yellow brick road,” she met the Scarecrow, the Tinman, and the Cowardly Lion. The introduction of each of these characters is another way for the reader/audience to become involved in the story. Because Dorothy’s dog Toto ran under the curtain, Dorothy was able to see that the Great and Powerful Oz was just a man with noisemakers and smoke screens and “because of that…” Dorothy learned she had the power to get home on her own.

Figure 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE STORY SPINE</th>
<th>STRUCTURE</th>
<th>FUNCTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once upon a time...</td>
<td>Beginning</td>
<td>The world of the story is introduced and the main character’s routine is established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every day...</td>
<td>The Event</td>
<td>The main character breaks the routine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But, one day...</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>There are dire consequences for having broken the routine. It is unclear if the main character will come out alright in the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of that...</td>
<td>The Climax</td>
<td>The main character embarks upon success or failure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And, ever since then...</td>
<td>End</td>
<td>The main character succeeds or fails, and a new routine is established.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finding Ideas: Think of three stories with details vivid enough for you to remember
- Can be Coda stories
- Can be funny stories
- Can be stories with a moral

Choosing Characters: Who is in your story?
- What physical characteristics do they have
- Why are they important to your story
- What is their relationship to one another?

Creating Character Empathy: How do you want the listener to feel about your character?
- What will you do or say to make that connection?
- How do your characters feel about one another?
- How does that influence your story?

Identify the Conflict: What is happening to your characters or main character that drives the story?
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- What is keeping the listener interested
- Why is it important to the story?

Follow the Storyline:
- Once upon a time______________________.
- Every day ________________.
- One day ________________.
- Because of that ________________.*
- Until Finally ________________.

Due to the time constraints of the program, students in this cohort worked from formulation of ideas to a final story over three days. They shared with the class at the end of the week. In a classroom or mentoring session, each of these steps can be assigned over time, or repeated, in order to focus on the target skill. The video featured in figure 5 is a story from Rose Davis, a member of the support team for the first COMPASS cohort. In her story “The Magical Kitten,” you can see evidence of her working through the story spine technique in order to create structure for her story. In addition to recounting the events of her ploy to hide her new pet, she also shares a bit about her devious behaviour and qualities about herself she has embraced because of the experience.

*Figure 5

https://youtu.be/IzA2b2ZHwK4

While we did not have the opportunity to do so with our cohort, once stories are completed and recorded, an instructor can use stories as a source for additional lessons in self and peer evaluation are beneficial in identifying character development, transitions, constructed action and dialogue as well as message equivalence, cohesion and sign choice. We focused on the tradition of storytelling, the shared language and culture we have as CODAs and encouraged participants to share in spoken English, signed language, or a combination of the two encouraging them to find ways in which they most strongly identify as CODA in further iterations we could focus on aspects of ASL discourse.
Conclusions

In conclusion, storytelling is an important way to pass on linguistic and cultural heritage to the next generation (Sutton-Spence, 2010), as we educate the next generation of interpreters it is imperative that we emphasize the traditions and rich cultural history of the Deaf community. "Storytelling promotes expressive language development in both speech and written composition, as well as receptive language development in both reading and listening” (Abrahamson, 1998) The use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool is a fun way to engage students in ASL language development while sharing a valued piece of Deaf culture. In guiding students and mentees through the components of effective storytelling, students routinize the application of linguistic components such as meaning, cohesion, language markers and affect. Likewise, through incorporating plot, character development, and emotion, students gain insight to native-like cues and backchanneling techniques required for effective interpreting.

References


https://www.aerogrammestudio.com/2013/06/05/back-to-the-story-spine/


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TACKWVfXHyM


doi:10.1080/1045988x.1991.9944582
Appendix 1

Figure 1 Transcription:

Tonce upon a oime in a coreign fountry there lived a gauteiful birl named Rindercella. Rindercella lived with her sticked wep-mother and two sister step-uglies. Poor Rindercella, she had to do all the wirty dork and those two sister step-uglies all they did was hush their bair.

Now, in that same coreign fountry there lived a Prandsome Hince, that Prandsome Hince was so lad and solenly he decided to have a Drancy-fess ball and invite all the gauteiful birls. Well, when those two sister step-uglies heard that they said, “Rindercella! Rindercella! Drinx our fesses and hush our bair! We want to go to the Drancy-fess ball!”

After they left, Rindercella she just cat down and sried and she was kititin’ there sryin’ when along came her Gairy Fodmother. Her Gairy Fodmother said, “Rindercella, why are you kititin’ there sryin’?” Rindercella said, “(crying) I wanna go to the Drancy-fess ball and all I got to wear are these wirty dags.”

That Gairy Fodmother said, “Pro noblem, and she turned those wirty dags into a drancy fess and she turned a cumpkin into a poach and she said, “Now you must remember to return at the moke of stridnight because if you don’t all of this will turn back.

Off Rindercella went and when she got to that Drancy-fess ball, the very pirst ferson to see her was that Prandsome Hince and Mmmm, he lell in fove with her. He would not dance with anyone else all night. But then suddenly, the mock cluck stridnight and Rindercella stan down the rairs and when she stan down those rairs, she slopped her dripper. Now when that Prandsome Hince came after her, the only thing he found was that slopped dripper.

Well the next day he went all over that coreign fountry looking for the gauteiful birl whose foot would fit into that slopped dripper. Those two sister step-uglies wanted to try to try it on but their fig beet fidn’t dit it, Nnn-mm (head-shake “no”). But when Rindercella tried it on, her fittle leet fid dit it!

Well to make a strong story lort, Rindercella and that Prandsome Hince they got married and hived lappily ever after. And the moral of the story is, if you wanna catch yourself a Prandsome Hince, all you have to do is slop your dripper (laughing).