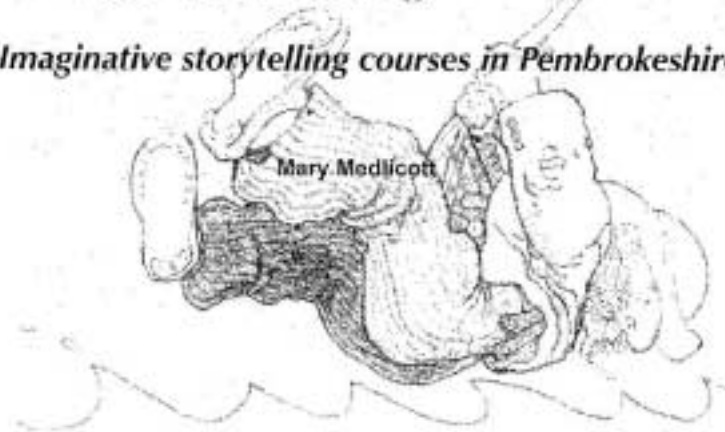


“Cor, I loved that!”

Fine Welsh Fibbing

Imaginative storytelling courses in Pembrokeshire



Mary Medlicott

Sixty years ago when the WJEC was formed, oral storytelling in the classroom was probably more common. Children's language-needs today make it vital for it to return. In eight Storytelling courses I've run in Pembrokeshire over the last three years, participants have shown how Foundation Stage teachers can become convinced and excellent storytellers and, by so doing, open a treasure-house of creativity in their classes. The key is not me. It's not the story. It's not even the fact that the story is orally told. It's a particular approach to storytelling.

By now, 48 teachers have attended the Storytelling course. Part of its success is that they always see me at the coal-face - in action with a classroom of children. They see an approach to storytelling which is relaxed and informal, prepared but not pre-scripted, and conducted with an openness to children's responses and to creativity and imagination. They see the

ingredients that work: an introductory chant; a simple, strongly-felt story; telling the story orally, not reading it aloud; encouraging participation but not letting it distract from the story; rhythms, actions, simple props and sing-song phrases that get the children involved.

A second ingredient of success is that following the half-hour when the story is told comes another half-hour of creative activities which give the children the chance to absorb it. The activities may be storyboarding or storymapping or making a simple drawing with captions. They may include oral retelling. Whatever it is, it is done in small groups, giving each visiting teacher the chance to work with just a few of the children who have heard the story. This allows a rare opportunity to concentrate: working at this level provides valuable information about the story itself and about individual children's abilities with language.

The third and crucial part of the course occurs when the teachers return to their own schools. In the following fortnight they are expected to tell their own class the same story I told and to tell it several times. Repeated tellings embed story structure and language. Teachers are also expected to engage their class in similar follow-on activities. At both these points they are free to improvise. They can tell my story in their own particular way. They can adapt my classroom activities to the particular needs of their class or, if they wish, create new ones. But however they do things – and it's surely a sign of success when an otherwise disruptive boy bursts out, 'Cor, I loved that!' – they return a fortnight later for another half-hour dose of storytelling and another half-hour of small-group work in the same class as before. Altogether they get five doses, a commitment which gives them a detailed chance to observe the progress over time of one particular set of children and of the class in general. A feature of the responses they cannot help but notice is that they as individuals become very loved by the groups of children they work with. In turn, their observations of particular children are always heard with great attention by the children's classroom teacher who is also, naturally, part of the course.

Yet another feature of the success – teachers comment on it in their final evaluations – are the two half-hours we spend together prior to going into the classroom and after. These are times for preparation, feedback and shared professional talk. Later, through the county's E-portal, participants can access further storytelling resources. At this point what counts is the sharing. An opportunity is given to hand out notes: some are reminders of the story and the related creative activities; others highlight general issues such as ways of remembering a story, strategies for arranging group-work or the fact that this kind of storytelling approach cannot happen if it is not built in to teachers' planning. Most importantly, these chats are occasions when teachers share examples of the story work their own classes have done and discuss their personal feelings of growing confidence and achievement. The 'oohs' and 'aahs' at this stage are worth hearing. For

teachers, there's nothing to compare with the magical sense of having been able to hold the attention of listeners sufficiently to produce such stunning work. It's a major reason I do my storytelling. It's the reason I know those Pembrokeshire courses succeed. At least four teachers have specifically said that the course has changed their whole way of teaching. All say that, through the storytelling, they feel more of a connection with their pupils.

So far, the Pembrokeshire courses have focussed on Foundation Stage teachers with funding coming from Basic Skills. Participants have used the work to assess speaking and listening in a selection of pupils. Whether the courses themselves can go right up the Primary age-range is a question for the future. A strong wish of Eva John, organiser of the courses and the inspiration behind them, is that they should. A start will be made next year. Many who have already attended will be pleased. One said, 'It would be great to do this as a whole school approach so we could become a storytelling school.' Some have already taken the stories into top Junior classes and whole-school assemblies. Whatever the class or occasion, they have never reported a failure. Children have always shown considerable interest. Local Welsh stories have proved especially popular; one Year 4 class when told the tale of Pembrokeshire giant, Skomar Oddy, insisted on making their own 3D giant. Year 6 classes have likewise been gripped. Quiet children who don't normally speak in class have been noticed as showing particular benefit. So have disruptive boys and also ESL children. Improvements in expressiveness and vocabulary have been widely seen, so has progress in writing, especially when the storytelling is linked with ICT. Many children have learned to make audio and video recordings of their own storytelling.

The impact has also been felt beyond school gates. Teachers have told the stories to nephews and nieces. Parents have commented about them being recounted at home. Sometimes unexpected effects have occurred such as when Year 1 girls in Rosh School, so loving this new kind of approach from their teacher,

went to ask her a special question, 'Mies, can we go up the Presell hills to look for Skomar Oddy?' The day we went was magic, the one bright day in a rainy week. But we would never have gone at all if they hadn't asked. To me, the curiosity and confidence of those enquiring children is what it's all about and what makes it all worthwhile.

Mary Medlicott

(Ed's note: Mary's latest collection of stories, *Shemi's Tall Tales*, was published earlier this year.)

