
“Meant to be read out loud: Building Bridges to Each Other, the Text, and the World Through Story Telling”

Melissa Castino Reid

“The formula is simple, and it’s reduced to four words every kid in the world knows:

Tell me a story. It’s that easy.”

- Don Hewitt, discussing the secret of the successful show, “60 Minutes”

When I was a kid, my grandmother would read the Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley out loud to my brother and me. I can recall the plastic feet of my pajamas making a crunching sound as I got settled in to listen. Stories of Little Orphan Annie and the Raggedy Man filled my imagination with vivid images while the sound of my grandmother’s voice gave me peace and lulled me to a good night’s sleep. I can recall my father, brother and I as we read from Richard Scarry’s *Illustrated Dictionary*. Each page had two columns of words; my brother and I chose a new vocabulary tower each night. I remember getting lost in the very busy, busy pictures that Scarry drew. As an adult, I also have a recollection of driving up to the North Shore, with my boyfriend (now husband) in the passenger seat as he read the opening chapters of *A Winter’s Tale* by Mark Helprin, a book recently named one of the top 10 books of the last 25 years in the NY Times.

Reading out loud is an important intellectual activity that allows both the reader and the listener(s) to connect to a

shared text, but it also has a vital role in multiple educational settings. Margaret Atwood says it best: “Our first stories come to us through the air. We hear voices. [...] From listening to the stories of others, we learn to tell our own” (71-79). Furthermore, reading out loud permits the reader and listener to use their imaginations, an essential tool that leads to making knowledge, improving reading comprehension, problem solving and cognitive development. In Ron Norman’s article titled “Cultivating Imagination in Adult Education,” he discusses the philosophy of the narrative in our lives as individuals:

‘We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and live by narrative.’ The development of the ‘narrative concern’ is, arguably, educationally relevant to any teaching practice. (By narrative, I don’t mean fictional narrative, but rather the narrative shaping of content).

I believe students *of all ages* should be given ample opportunity to use their imaginations. Why? Because the power of the imagination leads us to both stronger problem solving skills (professionally and personally) as well as improved cognitive development in how we see ourselves and each other.

Walter R. Fisher’s chapter titled “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm” provides a strong foundation of rhetorical composition theory for this assignment. Fisher believes in the notion that humans are “in actions and practice, as well as in [their] fictions, essentially storytelling animals” (375). Since this project has storytelling at its core, it allows humans to be the animals in this narrative paradigm, proposed by Fisher. Welcome to the zoo!

Keep in mind that I have not just opened the zookeeper’s gates to the animals-as-storytellers; I have asked the “animals” to read stories out loud to another person of their choosing. In doing so, the assignment not only brings out both the writer’s and listener’s stories, but it also deepens reading comprehension and literacy through the power of the imagination; all are important parts of the composition process. For me, all of this led to the fol-

lowing question: since reading out loud and telling stories are so important, how can I incorporate both into my *writing* classes?

As a community college writing instructor in downtown Minneapolis, I challenged myself to create a writing assignment package for my students that integrated the concepts of reading out loud and/or storytelling. In a nutshell, I have asked my students to connect with a person outside of class and read a non-fiction story from our textbook out loud to them. My students are then required to ask questions of their listener and report that conversation back to me in the form of a four-page paper.

Several things prompted the creation of the assignment. First of all, I was getting tired of the age-old narrative essay. How many times must I read about my students' first drive, date, day of school, or trip to Disneyland? Secondly, I wanted to create an early assignment for my multicultural classroom that was accessible for all students. In any given class, I may have students from Somalia, the south side of Chicago or across the river in St. Paul. As I walk the halls of this school, I hear over 80 languages spoken. My composition classes are full of various races, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, genders and their preferences, cultures and religious/spiritual representations. This [read out loud] assignment presents a blank canvas for a colorful mosaic of human experiences, and no one is left unchanged. Besides telling stories and reading them out loud, this assignment embodies a common goal in my classes: to reach all students "where they are" in terms of writing, reading comprehension, and critical thinking.

I do believe in the power of storytelling. I tell stories to my students about my journey into reading, learning, critical thinking and, most definitely, my writing process as well as stories about my family, my partnership with my husband, and teaching moments. After all, here in Minnesota, storytelling is a part of our culture as we tell tall tales of the fish that got away. Look no further than our own Garrison Keillor and his protégé Kevin Kling; for these two men, storytelling is an oral tradition that is anchored in our humanity. But the practice of sharing narratives is worldwide, and my student body at this community college reflects that global community.

Since telling stories is universal, it is a natural fit in a multicultural classroom. In the anthology *Seeding The Process Of A Multicultural Education*, Gene-Tey Shin advocates for this in a chapter titled, “Growing Stories”:

[W]e decide to continue to tell our stories, and what’s more, we decide to make them as much a part of the course as the books we read. [...] [O]ur stories are a part of who we are, not just as individuals outside of the school, but in our lives as students and teachers inside the school as well. [...] This need strikes me as so powerful that I make the writing of personal stories part of every class I teach. We write about our families, our histories, meals which represented friendship, the first time we realized we had racial identities, what it means to be a person, and suddenly English is not an imposition on life; it is life. (14-15)

By allowing our students to read out loud, write and tell stories, we come to learn and know more about each other and ourselves. My students classify themselves as part of a family, local community or citizen of the world, and they share those findings daily in our classroom as well as with their chosen listener. When we tell our stories as equals in a diverse setting, we transform each other – teachers and students - culturally, spiritually and educationally. To achieve this transformation, I ask students to read narratives out loud to another person.

The assignment, step by step:

1. In class, we read and discuss the narrative stories found in our textbook, *St. Martin’s Guide to Writing*. I let students choose from chapters called “Remembered Events,” “Remembered Person” and “Profiles.” Maya Angelou, Annie Dillard and Rick Bragg are just some of the authors included in these chapters. Students have a nice variety of stories from which to choose: a tomboy and her male peers throwing snowballs at passing cars; a “phenomenal woman” remembering an African American uncle who had a physical deformity; a Chinese American

daughter who defends her own disciplinarian mother's concept of love; a young man getting into a serious auto accident and walking away unscathed; and a student profiling a funeral home.

2. Students choose a story that they like from the three chapters. I want them to reflect on why and how they connect to the text. This can be done through discussion or free writing or both.

3. Students then choose a person outside of class with whom they have a collegial or close relationship. They will read out loud their chosen story from *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* to this person. (I did challenge any brave souls to read a story out loud to a complete stranger. One student did so and found her listener in a pool hall. Instead of 'trouble right here in River City,' it led to an enjoyable, well written essay about stories and chance connections between two pool playing enthusiasts.)

4. After they've selected a listener and a story, the student must create a list of at least five (or more) questions that connect to the story and begin a dialogue between writer and listener. Although I encourage them to create their own questions, I provide them with the following list of examples:

- What did the story make you think about or remind you of? Do you have a story to tell me?
- What image or metaphor sticks out the most and why?
- Why is reading so important? Did anyone ever read out loud to you? If yes, describe the experience.

5. Armed with a list a questions and a story to read out loud, students make an appointment with their reader. At the meeting of the student and listener, the story is read out loud. Afterwards, the student asks their listener the list of questions and records their answers.

Because this is such a diverse group of students, my hope is that students in my class experience any of the following things:

- The listener provides a set of compelling and engaging answers to my student's questions.
- The listener recalls a story, perhaps more than one, directly connected to the one read out loud.

- The student, either by way of hearing a story from the listener or just by reading the text, conjures up a story, or two, on their own.
- Or, all of the above happens in large or small ways.

The resulting paper should contain stories, dialogue, analysis, and process. As I have done this for two semesters (a total of four separate classes), the preliminary results have been varied, interesting and engaging. Furthermore, I can't wait to read them! Once the majority of my students get over the shock of the assignment, (*I have to do what? Read a story...out loud? To someone else?*), their fright transforms into a flurry of fun.

This comprehensive assignment package contains several positive pedagogical elements. In addition to Walter Fisher's concept of the narrative paradigm, it has unique active learning strategies: students read out loud, hold interviews and record their conversations. The assignment is also a nice precursor to the research paper (the next essay in my class) as they must put direct quotations into their essays. I'll also argue that this assignment helps the students for whom English is not their primary language. It also creates an opportunity for students to explore their identity in a variety of ways. For example, one of my African American students, Bonita, read out loud to a colleague at work the essay by Amy Wu about her mother's discipline techniques. In her paper, Bonita examined how she was brought up and compared that to Wu's experience as well as her listener's viewpoints of the parent/child relationship.

Finally, *A Learning College for the 21st Century* points out the secret that many educators already know: "Intelligence [is not] a single and simple measure of competence [...] these multiple intelligences combine differently in different people, and each individual has generally developed some of the intelligences more than others" (O'Banion 85-86). Nevertheless, the bottom line for me is this: the process for both student and teacher is a whole lot of (dare I say it?) fun. Frankly, I'm always open to enlightening methods of assessment that are achievable, easier to measure, and much more transparent for both students and teachers.

The results – stories of students' assignments

The first time I tried this assignment was in my Short Story class, taught in the spring of 2005. Instead of a multiple choice, fill in the blank midterm and final, I offered this brand new project. One student, Joy, recounted an emotional exchange as she read the Margaret Atwood short story “Happy Endings” over the phone to her younger sister. Joy shared how the ten year gap between them meant they weren’t close. But for a fleeting moment, while reading out loud to her on the phone, the gap between them dissolved, and the story operated as a bridge. Joy also heard a young woman, not a little girl, on the phone, especially in the mature answers to Joy’s questions about love, stories and the author’s challenge to all writers’ conventions of characters, plot, strong beginnings, and so-called “happy” endings.

Another student, Eoin, read Haruki Murakami’s “On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful Spring Morning” to Rachel, a female friend. After Eoin read the story out loud, Rachel “literally accosted [him] with a myriad of insults and swear words; [Eoin knew] the girl for some time and had never shared the story with her. She had said that, knowing her background, why on earth [had Eoin] not told her about [the story] sooner.” In the final analysis, Eoin reported: “I felt that reading this story both helped my understanding of the book, having someone like her who has analyzed classic writers extensively, made it easy for her to expose points I had yet to think of. It also made for an enjoyable experience because she loved the story so much.” By reading Murimaki’s story out loud to a friend, Eoin was forced to look at a favorite author’s work through his listener’s ears and eyes, seeing elements in the story he hadn’t before. I realized I was onto something good with Eoin’s illuminating essay.

The next time I assigned this package was this past spring of 2006. After my trial run of the assignment for the short story class, I clarified some of the outcomes so that it would fit a narrative essay often found in a standard composition course. For example, I offered more freedom to share stories that surfaced, I required a clear summary of the story they chose, and I encouraged a fun, brief, and detailed description of their listener. Then, I gave

this project to my College English I classes as their second paper of four in the semester. Here's the formula students must follow:

- Tell who your listener is by giving us a very brief bio and tell us why you chose this person. (1-2 paragraphs) The students get to use description as they "show" us their listener. I ask students to choose someone outside of class, perhaps a relative, spouse, mate or a good friend or co-worker. I want the students to interact with someone who (they think) will offer keen insights and interesting stories.
- Tell me the title and author of the story you chose to read out loud and explain why you chose it. Include a BRIEF summary of the story. (1-2 paragraphs)
- List the five or more questions that you asked your listener.
- Give a **summary and analysis of your conversation** of the story. Tell us what you agree/disagree with. Tell us if your listener surprised you in some way. Tell me if you surprised them in some way with some fact or quote about the writer of the story.
- If a story emerges in the conversation from either you or the listener, feel free to share it.
- The paper also must follow the standard conventions of a good intro, thesis, body and conclusion.

I also insisted on at least three direct quotations from their listener. I discovered this is a terrific way to introduce quoting an outside resource – and a live one at that! In addition, this activity engages critical thinking as the writer decides whether (or not) they agree with the listener's answers to the questions. All of these elements prepare the students for the research paper, which is assigned right after this one.

And I don't want to forget the fun of hearing, sharing, writing and/or telling a story. Kenny, a student in my evening class, read Annie Dillard's excerpt from her novel *An American Childhood* to a woman he's been dating. Kenny's admission that he learned something new about his listener dem-

onstrates a revealing aspect of this assignment: he writes of how Kellie, the listener, threw rocks at cars instead of snowballs. In response, Kenny wrote about his childhood, running through the farm fields, snatching ears of corn and lobbing them at semis as they blasted down the lonely, country highway:

We started gathering up our ammo when we came to the end of the field. Our ammo was corn cobs broke in half. In between the end of the field and Highway 95 is a row of tall pine trees. We would have to arch our throw to get at the cars and trucks that passed on the highway. We were out of sight of the passing drivers, but we had a clear view of them as they sped past us. This was not a game of getting away with something, but it was a game of skill and timing. Somehow in the midst of all this, I felt like a grown-up. I actually felt on a level playing field, if not more superior because I felt that we had the upper hand because they couldn't see us.

These stories prompted humor, surprising connections and a stellar paper that reports the conversations between Kellie and Kenny as well as the stories they tell. Plus, the assignment drew them closer together as a couple:

Now Kellie is aware of something about me that if I hadn't read her the story, 'An American Childhood.'... I love the idea reading to Kellie more often. It has been a bonding experience for the two of us. We both agree that if we have children of our own, we will read to them every night. Whether the story or book is good, it still is a great conversation piece. By reading to each other, our communication skills have improved and it has been a great pastime for the two of us. It has been a great way for us to get to know each other better.

Through the act of reading out loud, this kind of critical reflection shows us that my student has opened doors that might

ordinarily have remained closed had they opted for television programs.

Another student from the same evening class, Rachel, read to her mother “The Last Stop” by student writer Brian Cable. The essay profiles a funeral home with offbeat humor, realism and objectivity. As mother and daughter sat at the kitchen table, they found themselves in a deep discussion about death, cremation, and viewing the body. The exchange prompted this from Rachel’s mom: “Most people, when they have deep conversations and personal sharing, they become enlightened and learn about the viewpoints they didn’t realize the other person had.” Here, Rachel describes how her mom didn’t want this special time to end and asked her daughter to continue when they hit a lull in the conversation:

‘Are you done with me?’ says Mom, somewhat sadly.

‘Do you wanna be done?’

‘Not really. This is interesting.’

‘Well, we can keep going then.’ And we do.

In my Saturday morning class, another student (also named Rachel) wrote about reading the same essay, “The Last Stop,” to her mom also. For this Rachel and her mom, it was a chance for both to heal from the loss of Rachel’s maternal grandmother. My student concludes her essay with this line: “Reading ‘Last Stop’ out loud to my mother clarified the moments of my grandmother’s death for me. It forced us to share more about that time as friends without the complicated mother/daughter stuff.” In both these cases, Fisher’s notion of narration as a vehicle of self-actualization applies, for he believes “good reasons are the stuff of stories, the means by which humans realize their nature as reason-valuing animals... [t]he philosophical ground of the narrative is ontology” (383). When both students sat down with their mothers to read the essay about the funeral home, each had profound conversations about death and dying, found deep connections with their mothers, and came to know more about themselves and each other.

Another essay that was read out loud often was Amy

Wu's essay, "Some Kind of Mother." In the story, Amy, a Chinese American daughter, writes respectfully of her strict but loving mother, even after she spansks Amy in front of family and friends just for saying out loud she didn't like her mom's cooking. One of my students, Bonita, shared how she related to this essay: "In the African American culture, around the 70's or 80's, you got beatings anywhere or anytime. My mother came to my junior high school and hit me in front of the school social worker, or my friends." Bonita read Wu's piece out loud to her friend and coworker, Doris, who defended the disciplinary action: "Amy's mother had Amy's best interest at heart, she wanted Amy to be respectful. My mother did some of the same things, she showed her love in a way that I didn't think she loved me." Both students looked at the essay with a shared experience and perspective, deepening their connection to the story and one another.

With a student like Bonita, this assignment engaged her from the start, and she concluded the paper with thoughts on the acts of reading and writing: "Reflecting on the assignment, I thought about my own reading style. How I learned to read and what I enjoy reading. I am not a reader of everything [...] this assignment reminded me that [...] I needed to relate to something before I write about it." So reading out loud and writing about it promotes literacy. For me, this answers the plea of late Canadian critic and Professor Northrop Frye to all instructors: "A teacher's task is to transform a passive literacy into active post literacy, with the responsibility and freedom of that choice that is part of any world we would want to live in" (18). After giving this assignment to Bonita, I believe that she will more than likely read out loud to other adults too, thereby participating in an "active post literacy" community. Reading out loud permits students to reach this point of meta-cognitive development through the critical act of reflection.

Kelly Gallagher argues for this in a chapter titled "Leading Students into Meaningful Reflection":

Reflection begins with the self, and this is the level of reflection [students] are most comfortable with. When students are read-

ing a book, they naturally ask themselves, “What does this text mean to me?” But we want them to move beyond the self and into deeper levels of reflection. [...] It is this quest to recognize our commonalities, to move beyond ‘trite’ thinking, to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a human being that we seek to develop in our students. In doing so, we are preparing them for the critical issues of adulthood. (157-158)

While Gallagher wrote the book *Deeper Reading* primarily for teachers of grades 4-12, the same literacy challenges exist with my students at the community college level even though most of them are, indeed, adults. However, getting students of all ages past “the self and into deeper levels of reflection” is a worthy goal. So when I assign this read-it-out-loud project, I send my students on a journey beginning with self, moving outward to family, peers, community, country, cruising to humankind, all in one trip (Gallagher 158).

As I mentioned earlier, I work in an inner city community college where 80 different languages are spoken. While this assignment gives the *native* English speaker reasons to resist it, (e.g. *Oh Melissa, I just can't stand the sound of my voice. Who would want me to read anything out loud to them?*) I can only imagine what this does to the ESL students. Yes, reading English, or any language for that matter, out loud can be a frightening experience. But I would argue that since all my students get to pick who their listener is, they create “safe zones” in which to complete the assignment. Take Hamdi Omar, a student from Somalia, as she recounts her experience of reading out loud to a group of American and Somali friends: “I read the story aloud for them, but reading this story was not easy for me. At first, I felt so nervous and shaky, my hands and my face were sweating, but after I read half of the story, I became calm.” This kind of shift from “shaky” to “calm” is a common realization among *all* my students. In fact, when I read out loud to my parents, I had the same experience that Hamdi did, and English is my primary language.

Here's what another ESL student, Lyna Xiong, said about her experience: "Now I notice that to read [out loud] to others helps me to understand the people's levels [of understanding] and teaches me to know how to adjust my voice. [...] The more I read the more I become comfortable with others [listening]." Clearly, ESL students will benefit from this assignment, as frightening as it may seem.

Jim Cummins, a leader in secondary language acquisition and literacy development, penned the acronyms BICS and CALP, and I like these definitions:

Basic Interpersonal Communication

Skills - the language ability required for face-to-face communication where linguistic interactions are embedded in a situational context. **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency** – the language ability required for academic achievement in a context related environment. ("Ask an Expert")

It is my belief that this read-out-loud project combines BICS and CALP in an effective way for all ESL/ELL students. As they read stories out-loud, they practice linguistic communication while strengthening their academic achievement in one assignment:

The research is clear that a combination of explicit development of language awareness (in this case phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle), together with socialization or immersion of students into the world of books, works better for most students than an emphasis on either phonics alone or reading meaningful text alone. ("Interview with Jim Cummins")

So, for the student not fluent in English, reading a story out loud to a person of their own choosing will benefit them both in terms of language awareness *and* the interaction of the listener.

Applying this assignment outside of my class

This assignment has potential in writing across the cur-

riculum programs, at the college level, as well as for our 5th - 12th graders. I discovered a nursing degree program that required storytelling as a large part of its successful curriculum. Imagine a political science class reading out loud either current news articles or chapters from recommended reading lists to a family member or friend. Teachers can adopt this as a service-learning project, whereby students read stories out loud to senior citizens, veterans, or even a blind or deaf person.

And I have no doubt that this assignment would be appropriate, engaging and enlightening for students in grades 5th - 12th grade. My writing group colleague, Lois Williams, a reading specialist out of Cottage Grove, mentioned to me that her 5th grade students are paired with elderly residents in a nearby senior housing complex. The students interview their subjects, write up the interview and then go back and read the finished product out loud to the stars of the paper. What a thrill for both the writer and listener!

Another one of my colleagues, Dawn, has her 10th grade students reading “The Things They Carried,” a creative nonfiction series of war stories by Tim O’Brien. If Dawn pairs her students with Vietnam Vets or even our current military personnel, recently home from Iraq, what kind of conversations, stories, and perspectives might surface? If offered, Dawn’s students get an assignment that potentially leaves a lifelong impression.

Final thoughts

In an age of too much technology and distractions, I’m asking my students to turn down their ipods, switch off the television and power down the cell phone, grab a book with a family member, friend or loved one, and read stories out loud to one another. When they do this, the results are clear. Students will:

- Call upon the imagination, a profound tool for critical thinking and problem solving which opens doors to making meaning and knowledge.
- Create memorable essays for themselves and the instructor.
- Connect to a text in a profound, personal and possibly surprising way.
- Communicate and share stories inspired by the

ones read out loud.

- Discover the author's purpose, language choices, description, and storytelling and apply it to their own writing.
- Quote and respond to an outside, primary source.

The bottom line is that students enjoy composing these essays, teachers will look forward to reading them, and individual lives, both inside and outside of class, are transformed in profound and positive ways. All of this stems from answering a simple request: *Tell me a story.*

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