When old is new: Exploring the potential of using Indigenous stories to construct learning in early childhood settings.

Dr CJS van Staden  
Senior Lecturer  
School of Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME  
AUSTRALIA  
evanstaden@nd.edu.au  
and  
Ms R Watson  
School of Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME  
AUSTRALIA  
rwatson1@nd.edu.au  

Abstract

Incorporating traditional indigenous stories in the Early Childhood Curriculum carries a powerful message of cultural diversity and change - from the past denigration of Indigenous South-African and Aboriginal cultures to appreciation and reinstatement of such cultures today. Storytelling has the ability to create the right learning environment for early childhood students. In this paper a report is given of an exploratory study of the traditional South African and Aboriginal Dreamtime stories, which are seen as possible vehicles and innovations to educate students in Early Childhood in Australia and South Africa. These stories will also be used to find links with different Learning Areas in the Early Childhood Curriculum. Exemplars of such exercises are illustrated by means of the South-African, *Wolf who wants to fly* and *Australian, Indigenous Balarool and the Bunyip (A Test of Wisdom)* stories. The reason for working across two continents is that in South Africa, as well as Australia, indigenous stories were kept alive over generations by orally transmitting them. Some comparisons between these two countries are made after exploring this approach by means of the two exemplars.

Introduction
This paper reports on explorations, via a literature study as well as action research in the qualitative mode the use of traditional stories: *Wolf who wants to fly* and *Bularool and the Bunyip* (Nauira, 2006), to teach students in Early Childhood. The aim of these explorations are two-fold. First, the overall aim is to show that traditional, stories can be of overall value in Early Childhood Education. Secondly, the particular aim is to show the value that such stories have in facilitating young South African and Australian students’ understanding of natural science concepts and process skills.

The rationale behind this research is that early childhood education requires a flexible teaching approach that responds to the social and cultural contexts that influence children’s learning experiences, behaviour and attitudes (Mallan, 2000, p.62). In South Africa, where the majority of learners are black Africans, this calls for a teaching approach that includes the telling of traditional African stories. Traditional African culture was orally transmitted, and story-telling as a teaching approach for early childhood learners appears therefore to be particularly appropriate in any African country. Furthermore, South Africa and Australia are multicultural countries with significant numbers of learners from western and eastern cultures. The telling of traditional stories caters at an early age for cross-cultural dissemination and reception. In the language learning area in the outcomes-based teaching approach (South Africa), the suggestion is made that language should be utilised to encourage intercultural understanding, access to other views, and a critical understanding of the concept of culture, which by implication includes all learners in South Africa (DoE 2002). All teaching approaches should be educationally sound. Thus, a discussion of the educational soundness of storytelling will be the point of departure in this paper.

**Storytelling - an educationally sound teaching practice**

Storytelling as an effective teaching tool calls for proficiency of language in its broadest sense, which is described by Gamede, Mnisi and Leibowitz (2000, p.93) as follows:

> The issue of proficiency should be seen in its broadest sense. It goes beyond mere communicative competence in a specific language and refers to the ability of teachers to create the right learning environment through the use of language. It is about commitment to change, teaching and learning styles, effectiveness and most of all, about using language to create a love of learning.
Storytelling has the ability to create the right learning environment for early childhood learners. All children love a well-told story. A well-told story catches children’s attention (Horn, 2003, p. 80) and stimulates therefore a love of learning. A well-told story, like all good teaching approaches, is grounded in the encouragement of the principles of active participation, critical reflection, flexibility, and cultural diversity (Mallan, 2000, pp.60-62).

African and Australian Indigenous, traditional stories carry a powerful message of cultural diversity and change - from the past denigration of the cultures to an understanding, an appreciation and reinstatement of these cultures. It is understandable that contemporary black Africans are seeking to revive and reinstate their traditional culture. It is a response to the alienation that black Africans experienced during the years of colonial and apartheid rule (Horn, 2003, p.52).

The purpose of storytelling as a teaching approach is to teach children the skill of *active listening*. The story must be such and, most important, it must be told in such a way that it demands response from the listener. In this regard, Bruchac (1997, p.1) says the following:

> It all begins with listening. There are stories everywhere around us, but many people don’t notice those stories because they don’t take the time to listen. Or if they hear a story being told that is one they heard they stop listening. “I’ve heard that before,” they say. Yet if we listen closely to any story we may hear new things almost every time it is told.

The teacher should encourage the hearing of new things. Students’s first reaction to stories are usually an aesthetic response, which then with teacher encouragement starts a ripple effect of responses allowing integrated teaching across the curriculum (Cox, 1996). Effective storytelling requires the following (Horn, 2003, p.53):

- All the learners should be able to see and hear the teacher.
- If all the children understand the local language, the story should be told in that language.
- Pictures should be used to illustrate the story.
- Storytelling should be practised as an art. There should therefore be variation in the tone and loudness of the teacher’s voice and the teacher should use appropriate facial and
bodily expressions.

- The story should be read interactively. The teacher should pause at appropriate places in order to ask questions. This encourages participation and reflective thinking.

All of the above are essential for effective storytelling, but in the final analysis effective storytelling depends on the story told. It must have a message that the children can understand and to which they can relate. In Africa this points first and foremost to traditional African folk stories, while in Australia the Dreamtime stories fulfils this role.

**Traditional stories**

Traditional African folk stories, the tales that people told to entertain, to enlighten and to teach morality, are the legacy that the indigenous African forefathers left. Traditional stories are, of course, not unique to Africa. Part of all cultures which include the Australian, Indigenous culture are folk stories that have been passed down through the ages. The survival of such stories implies that they satisfy certain universal human needs (Corrie & Maloney, 1998). Burke (1986) states that of the many traditional folk stories, the Indian and African stories are more easily understood by young learners than the Greek and Roman stories. “The Dreaming, said my grandmother long ago, is our people’s deep well of memory. It stores a wonderful mixture of sacred, mythical, and practical ideas, passed on to us from our ancestors” (Naiura, 2005. p.11). Naiura further explains that the mothers, fathers, grandmothers and uncles preserved the Dreaming for the Indigenous Australains by retelling the stories that their forbearers once told them. These stories are locked in memory so that it can be told to their children, who in turn will tell their children. Raines and Isbell (1994) identify the following as constitutive of the appeal that folk stories have for children:

- The themes are cross-cultural because they address the universal moral values of human decency that are common to all cultures.
- Good triumphs over evil.
- Resorting to trickery and deception leads to a bad end.
- One should be thankful for what one has in life and not covet another person’s abilities, riches or position.
- Hard work, perseverance and kindness are rewarded.
• Coming from an oral tradition the stories are easily remembered.
• The rhythmic language of rhyme and repeated phrases that mark action appeals to young children.
• The stories are often humorous and the humour can be understood by young children.
• The stories evoke strong visual pictures in the mind of the listener.
• The stories appeal to young learners’ strong sense of fantasy.

The traditional folk stories that are suitable for early childhood are stories have the following characteristics:

• The **plots** are skeletal, brief and action packed. Such stories are easily told and their message is easily grasped by young children. The actions in these stories are often only one repeated action, either something bad that children must not do or something good that they should do.

• The **behaviour of the characters** (usually animals) is predictable, that is, the same animal always behaves in a certain way, for example a jackal is always sly and crafty, a wolf is not clever and is consistently in trouble because of the jackal’s slyness, and the owl is wise. Furthermore, the characters are one-dimensional, never deviating from either their virtuosity or their evil. Young children soon learn the one-dimensional character assigned to the various animal characters, for example, the slyness of the jackal as trickster, the lion as the king and ruler and the wise owl who give good advice and can make wise decisions.

  In the Dreamtime stories the rainbow snake and the kangaroo are involved in creation of the land and animals and in the story of the exemplar the owl is clever and outsmarts the crocodile.

• The **settings** are vague and endlessly adaptable
• There are only a few **themes** and these are the moral lessons that run through all the stories, for example, one suffers if one disobeys rules or laws.
• The **mood** of the folk tales is generally serious with some humour.
• The settings of the stories are mostly in nature and thus it is natural to move to the
introduction of science concepts.

The value of traditional folk stories in early childhood education
The behavioral characteristics and the nature of development during early childhood are such that traditional folk stories are particularly suitable in early childhood education (Burke 1986). Folk stories’ values in early childhood education are, firstly that they appeal to young children’s curiosity, love of activity, impatience, imagination and the need for stability. Secondly, folk stories are an effective tool for developing literacy (Burke, 1986; Griffiths & Clyne, 1996; Philips, 1999; Mallan, 2000 and Nutbrown, 1994) whilst at the same time integrating other learning areas and further facilitating children’s cognitive development. Thirdly, folk stories can be used to develop the children socio-culturally, emotionally and morally.

The value of traditional folk stories to introduce science in the Early Childhood Curriculum
Storytelling is a simple but highly effective way of introducing science; the reasons for its effectiveness are the following:

- It provides learners with opportunities to play with words and science concepts in the text by inviting them to retell (orally or in writing), drawing and/or acting the story they were told.
- Interspersed questions aid comprehension and thus remembering and retelling
- Inquiry is stimulated if, after a story is told, the learners are encouraged to as their own questions; think about science concepts; provide their own insights by means of create their own interpretations, orally, pictorially and/or in writing
- Storytelling allows for cross-curricular teaching and thus for developing literacy in other learning areas by playing with the story in a number of different forms (visual arts, dramatic play, block play, mathematical games, science and so forth)

General cognitive development
Storytelling, in particular the telling of folk tales/indigenous stories, plays an important role in general cognitive development. It is “a vital means of extending children’s thinking and fostering
their knowledge and attitudes” (Nutbrown, 1994, p.92). The themes nourish children’s patterns of learning. Through play and narrative, children use their imagination and creative thinking skills to understand their world; to synthesize, refine, and redefine their experiences; and to make links between past actions and future possibilities (Mallan, 2000). Furthermore, appropriate interspersed questioning can stimulate learning in other learning areas besides literacy as well as addressing contemporary concerns, such as environmental awareness, on the appropriate level of understanding. Storytelling can therefore be used to enhance comprehension and thus competence in: life skills; numeracy; science & technology and environmental awareness

**Social-cultural**

Traditional folk stories provide distinct social and cultural experiences. Folk tales reflect the traditional culture from which they stem and therefore their preservation and transmission via education contributes to the preservation and transmission of traditional and/or indigenous culture.

**Emotional**

Traditional folk stories arose from real-life experiences and listeners can therefore often find links with their own lives (Nutbrown, 1994). The stories provide a fantasy world, but, having arisen from real-life experiences, they allow children to face their own fears and frustrations, and thus acquire essential life skills.

**Moral value system**

Traditional folk tales have always been the vehicle for teachings of that society’s value system (Sawyer & Comer 1991:78). Furthermore, they all taught the basic universal virtues, that is, the objective standards of human decency. They also carried a message of goodwill, namely, that honesty pays, that virtue is rewarded and that good will triumph in the end and evil will be punished.

**Reporting on the construction and implementation of two learning programs from traditional stories as exemplars in South Africa and Western Australia**

The practice of planning early childhood learning programs around stories has, in recent years,
become very popular. Stories convey powerful images and messages and have therefore tremendous potential for stimulating learning (Williams, 1991; Nutbrown & Hirst, 1993 and Sawyer & Comer, 1991). They are a rich source of curriculum content, and a learning program that integrates various learning areas and different learning styles may be built around a single, well-chosen story. The story forms the starting point of the learning program or project. A learning program which is constructed around a story promotes active learning. The story catches the children’s attention and serves as point of departure for exposing the learners to knowledge from various learning areas, and thus instills in them a curiosity about the world around them (Davin & Van Staden 2005). Furthermore, such a learning program can accommodate the different learning styles, that is, the different ways in which persons construct and demonstrate knowledge.

The report of the research conducted in South Africa and Australia is provided in a Power Point Presentation (handout provided at presentation). The two exemplars of the traditional African story: Wolf wants to fly (Von Wielligh, 1922) and the Australian Indigenous Dreamtime story: Bularool & The Bunyip – A Test of Wisdom (Nauira, 2002) were used to integrate various learning areas in pre-primary (the reception year, 4-6 year-olds). Special attention was given in the exemplars to the teaching of natural science concepts. Literacy programs and pedagogies need to recognise cultural diversity rather than emphasise differences through fragmentation of the learning program adding to the disadvantages and marginalisation of Indigenous cultures (Luke cited in Makin and Diaz, 2002).

Conclusion
Using Indigenous, traditional stories and expanding their themes into a learning program to enhance teaching and learning in the science learning area has proven to be successful in the two exemplars provided and warrant further exploring in a wider population. It effectively facilitated spontaneous understanding of new learning content and it proved to be a flexible teaching approach that could lend cohesiveness to the various learning areas. This research successfully explored links between language and the natural sciences learning areas. It should simultaneously stimulate a renewed interest in Indigenous stories; literature and science, and ultimately a love for reading and learning. Finally, and most importantly we should not only acknowledge the value of retaining the Indigenous story for its cultural value, but also as a useful and valuable teaching vehicle.
References


