

Listening Is an Act of Love: The Power of Storytelling in Education

by Barbara Becker

In 1993 Dave Isay, an independent radio producer, gave two thirteen-year-old boys in the Ida B. Wells Housing Project on the South Side of Chicago recording equipment and a few pointers. The boys proceeded to make an audio diary of their lives, interviewing friends, family, and members of their community. The piece, which the boys named “Ghetto Life 101,” aired on National Public Radio and won numerous broadcasting honors. The awards were an acknowledgment of the power of citizen-produced radio, audio pieces by the people, for the people. And for Isay, the project helped spark the idea for StoryCorps, the largest oral history initiative in the country. Here, StoryCorps shares some ideas for the use of storytelling in education.

At StoryCorps, we have a saying that defines the core of our work: “Listening Is an Act of Love.” It may seem soft at first – Listening Is an Act of Love – but anyone who spends time with the stories of everyday Americans grasps quickly that the simple act of sitting down with friends or family members, asking them sincerely about their lives, and listening deeply to their responses is powerful and sometimes even life-changing for the storyteller and the questioner alike.

The heart of StoryCorps is the conversation between two people who are important to each other: a son asking his mother about her childhood, an immigrant telling his friend about coming to America, or a couple reminiscing on their 50th wedding anniversary. Over time, we began to realize the potential of our work in the classroom. This has led to a fruitful relationship with select schools, including ACORN Community High School in Brooklyn, NY.

During the spring semesters of 2006 and 2007, 80 students from the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program at ACORN took part in workshops conducted by StoryCorps and then participated in interviews at our soundproof “StoryBooths” in New York City.

Each ACORN interview represents a genuine moment, shared between young confidants – from the reflections of Hasiyina Prince, who is learning to come to terms with scoliosis (see sidebar), to the memories of Tia Williams, who recalls the strength of her mother after her father left the family when she was two years old. “My mother would have to hop the turnstile to go to work, and she would have no money to get back,” says Tia. (To listen, visit: www.storycorps.net/listen/tia-williams-and-lekeisha-williams).

The feedback that best sums up the

power of storytelling in the classroom comes from an ACORN teacher: “Every student was enriched by completing an interview. For a project to affect EVERY student at EVERY level—whether it be a developmental level or a learning level—is rare indeed.”

Regardless of the level of your students, I’d like to offer some tips for bringing storytelling into your classroom.

1 – Laying the Foundation

You may want to start off by asking students to tell you a fact about a celebrity. Nearly every young person in America today can do this effortlessly. This will allow you an opportunity to talk about how we consume information about famous people all the time, but it is us, everyday people, who make the fabric of American history, not just the rich and famous.

Discussing efforts to capture the voices of Americans can lead to new understandings of history and how it is collected and written. For instance, stories recorded through StoryCorps are archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, alongside one of the most important records of American history, 2,300 interviews of former slaves who were interviewed in the mid-1930s as part of the WPA’s Federal Writers Project.

You can take the conversation into the realm of the personal by asking students if they’ve had a meaningful conversation with anyone longer than 30 minutes in the past month. Was it a face-to-face talk, or over the phone? Did it happen without a TV or radio in the background or while doing another task at the same time? How might these factors affect a conversation between two people?

2 – Planning an Interview

Next comes the real fun, helping students decide whom to interview and what

Performing Listening

- During an interview, your questions mostly come from listening to the interviewee (the person you are interviewing), not from the list you prepared in advance. As much as possible, look at the interviewee, not at your list of questions. Put your list to the side where you can find it if you get really stuck.

- Think of an interview as a conversation. Your main job is letting the interviewee know that you enjoy hearing what they are saying—by acting out your listening. Most important is to always look in their eyes, unless you are in a culture where you show respect by lowering your eyes. Respond to what is being said with appropriate facial expressions, nodding, saying “uh-huh.”

- Your most important response is to ask follow-up questions that come from listening to what’s just been said. If the interviewee has just told you she loves gardening, your next questions most likely responds to that statement. You might ask any of the following questions: “What do you most enjoy when you are gardening?” “Tell me about your garden.” “What do you grow in your garden?” “I help my dad put horse manure on our garden. What do you use for fertilizer?”

- A successful interview builds a relationship. Your excellent listening may help your interviewee remember things they haven’t thought about in a long time. Listening is your main way of honoring the experience and expertise of your interviewee. Of course, you’ll also say “thanks” several times at the end of the interview.

From The Kids Field Guide to Local Culture, a publication of the Madison Children’s Museum, By Mark Wagler, Ruth Olson, and Anne Pryor.

to ask. One way to elicit an answer is to ask, “What are stereotypes you want to break? Who do you know who bucks stereotypes?” Or simply, “Who are the people in your family, community, life? Who should be telling their story?”

Once they have selected a storyteller, they are ready to develop questions. You may ask, “What are three questions you would want to ask someone?” “What are three questions you would want someone to ask you?” To make this even easier, StoryCorps has developed a “Question Generator” (see www.storycorps.net).

Sample Questions

- What have you learned in life so far?
- What does your future hold?
- What are you most proud of?
- Do you have any regrets?
- What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- Is there something about yourself that you think no one knows?
- Is there anything you wanted to talk about that we didn’t get to?

3 – Recording Their Stories

Often, we get requests for technical advice about recording equipment. Story Corps interviews are conducted on broadcast-quality equipment in sound proof booths, but you don’t need to have state-of-the-art devices to record audio with impact.

Whether you borrow, buy (many recorders on the market cost less than \$100), or use equipment you already have, you will want your students to get comfortable with it in advance. That way they’ll be able to devote their full attention

Interviewing involves an ironic contradiction: you must be both structured and flexible at the same time. While it’s critical to prepare for an interview with a list of planned questions to guide your talk, it is equally important to follow your informant’s lead. Sometimes the best interviews come from a comment, a story, an artifact, or a phrase you couldn’t have anticipated. The energy that drives a good interview – for both you and your informant – comes from expecting the unexpected.

-- Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research. 2nd Edition.* Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002.

to the person they are interviewing.

Seth Fleischauer, a third-grade teacher at the Earth School, a public elementary school in New York City, uses the recording feature on his laptop to enhance the writing skills and confidence of students who may be having difficulty with the written word. Seth, who has himself participated in a StoryCorps interview with his grandfather, notes, “It’s amazing to see the change in attitude when you offer a student the opportunity to record their story. Storytelling goes from being an undesirable task embedded in the labor of writing to one that is at once exciting and meaningful to the student. In the end, I have the student listen to the recording and transcribe their story onto paper. The end result is the same: the student writes a story, but recording the story first becomes an internal motivator for the student to do their best.”

Pointers for using interview equipment and selecting an ideal interview location can be found in the “Do It Yourself Guide” on our web site.

4 – Illustrating Lesson Plans Through Storytelling

Many teachers have found that playing sample interviews to complement a teaching unit is a good way to make history and current events come alive. We’ve tried to make this very easy on the StoryCorps web site (www.storycorps.net), where users can select from hundreds of past stories. The archive is searchable, so you can find interviews that pertain to a certain subject or issue relevant to your students. (ESL teachers also find that playing a variety of interviews with different dialects and accents helps their students develop a comprehension for the wide range of voices in our country.)

And remember the saying, “Listening Is an Act of Love”? In 2007, StoryCorps published its first book and accompanying CD by that very name. *Listening Is an Act of Love* (Penguin Press) is a compilation of 50 of the best StoryCorps stories, arranged thematically around the topics of Home and Family, Work and Dedication, Journeys, History and Struggle, and Fire and Water (stories about 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina). For a free discussion guide, call us at (646) 723-7020, x75.

With some creative adaptation, we hope you find these tips useful in your classrooms, as they have been for us.

Barbara Becker is a Senior Adviser to StoryCorps.