

# Storytelling: One Way to Engage Students in Complex Text

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Small groups of nervous ninth-graders huddled together in the grassy, albeit windy courtyard, rehearsing their opening lines and recalling important phrases and details from their stories. Students' arms gestured to demonstrate the movement of wind or the size of mythological beasts, and anxious laughter escaped as students forgot details of their stories. Other high school students, with lunches in hand, gathered on the tiered seating that faced a cement stage serving as the amphitheater, laughing and joking with each other between bites of food as they waited for the performance to begin. After a final check on the groups, the teacher ushered the first two students onto the stage and a hush—excluding the birds singing, the racket from the air-conditioning unit, and the rhythmic beeping of a delivery truck in reverse—fell over the crowd as the students apprehensively began.

Just as Homer had done before Greek audiences of ancient times, our two students began "The Invocation" of *The Odyssey* by asking the Muses for a successful performance of their retellings of heroes, gods, and monsters of ancient times. With arms moving and voices imperceptibly gaining in confidence, they introduced the tale to their peers, with each giving his part of the opening section to the famous epic poem.

At the close of their storytelling, they smiled broadly, thrilled to be finished yet feeling satisfied, and they rushed to their seats amid the applause and hoots of their fellow teens. The culminating activity of this unit of study on storytelling continued as the next group took the stage to relate the tale of Odysseus and Calypso.

The purpose of this storytelling unit was to motivate students to read and understand a complex text on both comprehensive and analytic levels, and this project brought authenticity to the unit in an engaging way. This article details the processes and strategies that teachers can use through the use of storytelling to assist students in reaching a deeper level of meaning when encountering complex texts.

Our storytelling project began when a secondary English teacher (Second Author) sought the expertise of a university literacy professor (First Author) and invited her into the classroom to co-construct this project. We developed a collaborative relationship, which led to a three-year period of teaching, reflecting, revising, and re-teaching this unit. We collected evidence of students' comments via a questionnaire, a volunteer focus group, a student self-reflection rubric (Figure 1), and a teacher-created rubric (Figure 2) for grading presentations. The question guiding our project was, "How does storytelling encourage student engagement with complex text such as *The Odyssey*?"

## Ninth Graders and Complex Text

*The Odyssey*, which is often read at both the secondary and college levels, is a complex text. In order to prepare students more fully for the reading they will encounter after high school, districts are placing more of a focus on incorporating complex texts like *The Odyssey* into the curriculum. The relationship of a variety of structures within a text such as its vocabulary, sentence structure, coherence (how words and ideas connect), and text organization (ACT Inc., 2003; Shanahan, Fisher & Frey, 2012) determines its complexity (White, 2012). The reader's background knowledge is another aspect of text difficulty that is not found within the text (Serefini, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2012).

As a required part of the curriculum for ninth grade students in the second author's school district, *The Odyssey's* text complexity posed a challenge to the students' comprehension of deeper concepts. Students rarely reached a true understanding of the characters' motivations or identified the mood and tone, as they were uncomfortable with Homer's textual style.

*The Odyssey* is written as an epic poem, which means that the sentence and stanza structures are more challenging. For example, in Book IX (Homer, 2009, p. 1043) Odysseus addresses the Phaeacians telling the story of how he arrived on their island:

I am Laertes' son, Odysseus.  
Men hold me  
formidable for guile in peace and war:  
this fame has gone abroad to the sky's rim.

My home is on the peaked seamount of Ithaca  
under Mount Neion's windblown robe of leaves,  
in sight of other islands-Doulkhion,  
Same, wooded Zakynthos-Ithaca  
being most lofty in that coastal sea,  
and northwest, while the rest lie east and south.

Students struggled with the sentence structure as well as the necessary background knowledge. There are several islands mentioned, which prevented many students from pinpointing that Odysseus lives on the island of Ithaca. Eventually they might realize that Odysseus is Laertes' son and that Homer is not discussing two different characters. The use of places and characters with which they are unfamiliar, along with unknown vocabulary—*formidable*, *guile*, and *seamark*—added to its complexity. The use of the metaphor "under Mount Neion's windblown robe of leaves" caused further confusion until the students realized the use of figurative language and identified that Mount Neion is a

mountain on Ithaca. Understanding the motivations of the characters comes from close reading and discussion, but often the students focused on the minor details inhibiting them from determining the overall meaning. It is clear that *The Odyssey* represents a complex text and necessary strategies needed to be employed to engage and support students in the reading of this epic poem.

The most logical approach for teaching a complex text that involved the oral tradition was to use the oral tradition itself, or storytelling, to help students understand the text. Storytelling provided a way to assist students in connecting with this complex text by encouraging them to engage in close reading and discussion in order to create their stories.

### Storytelling and Close Reading

Storytelling has been utilized in a variety of ways within the classroom. For our purpose, storytelling is an oral rendition of a literary text, told in the narrator's own words (Peck, 1989; Strickland & Morrow, 1989), engaging the listeners actively in their understanding of the text. Long before written communication, storytelling served as a way to pass on history, religion, and the values or morals of a society from one generation to the next. This form of education was what Homer was engaging in when he presented *The Odyssey* to Greek audiences. By constructing tales of heroes who revealed values important to their culture, Greek storytellers passed on these treasured ideas.

We chose to use storytelling not only because it was a more authentic way of presenting *The Odyssey*, but also because it "is the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener's imagination" (National Storytelling Network, n.d.). In the way we are utilizing it, storytelling displays all aspects of literacy such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking, and viewing. Our student storytellers read, reread, discussed, and wrote to create a story. The audience listened to the words and viewed the gestures in order to make meaning from the teller's tale. Student storytellers used reading and discussion strategies to unlock the deeper meaning of the complex text. As a result, the listeners could create a better understanding of the text from the words and actions, and the storytellers had a more profound awareness of the story on multiple levels.

Close reading helps students navigate complex texts such as *The Odyssey* and is necessary to provide a successful storytelling. The Common Core Standards state that students need to "read closely to determine what the text says explicitly, to make logical inferences from their interactions with a text, and to cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p.10). Fisher and Frey (2012) state that the main goal of close reading is for students to develop reading habits that use their background knowledge to deepen their understanding of the text. Close reading of *The Odyssey* involves an acquisition of

background information on mythology, a careful reading of the text with focused discussions to flesh out the literal and figurative meanings, and the utilization of strategies to navigate the complex text.

Scholars state that as a part of the classroom experience we should introduce specific strategies (e.g., vocabulary instruction, rereading, discussion) to assist students in reading complex texts. Because the reader's ability to acquire and connect new content from the text to background knowledge is vital, certain limited vocabulary ought to be frontloaded, so the reader can connect to the text more clearly (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Serafini, 2013). In the case of *The Odyssey* unit, the students completed a short mythology project to provide essential background information prior to reading the epic poem. For this unit, the students researched several Greek gods, goddesses, monsters, and locations (e.g., Poseidon, Athena, Polyphemus, Hades) to provide background information and a historical framework for aiding understanding. This scaffolding is one support system for close reading success (Hinchman & Moore, 2013) and aids in the storytelling process.

Other opportunities for scaffolding the students were found in the natural process of creating a storytelling from a complex text. Reading complex text involves annotating while reading, rereading, discussing, incorporating questioning strategies, and utilizing graphic organizers (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Lapp, Moss, Grant, & Johnson, 2014; Serafini, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2012). In a similar manner, storytelling preparation involves rereading, discussing and planning so that the retelling is more than just facts of description and sequencing. This deeper understanding of the motivations, attitudes, and emotions of the characters is revealed in gestures, actions, and prosody of the storyteller (Peralta, 2010; Reedy & Lister, 2007; Shank, 2006).

Experts also recommend that short texts should be read multiple times for a variety of purposes (e. g., understanding the sequence of the passage, the key vocabulary, and the role of flashbacks) (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Lehman & Roberts, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2012). Since the plot events of *The Odyssey* are not presented chronologically, close reading is required to determine where and when the individual experiences of Odysseus fit into the overall story. Our students reread multiple times, specifically with the story they presented. In addition, we chose passages that were integral to identifying themes, characterization, mood, and tone.

Close reading is more than rereading as it involves the social construction of meaning by finding patterns within the text word choice and text structure via discussion (Hinchman & Moore, 2013; Lehman & Roberts, 2014). Many approaches have been employed to assist students in improving their close reading skills. To aid in the creation of the storytellings, we had students formulate questions as they read to generate discussion on key topics (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Lapp et al., 2014) and to allow them to tailor the discussions to their needs.

The medium of storytelling has been used successfully

in school settings to create learning communities (Shank, 2006) and to encourage collaborative engagement (Reedy & Lister, 2007; Simon, 2008) for improving understanding of complex texts. Reedy and Lister revealed that professional oral retelling enhanced the understanding of the character and structure complexity of *The Iliad* with primary students. Follow-up interviews with students revealed that they remembered not only content but also inferences in the story. Simon used guided roleplaying with high school students to help them understand and connect with the complex plot and themes in *Jane Eyre*.

From our own experiences with storytelling, the students built relationships and the listeners learned about the text. This “storyknowing” and learning is supported in Heinemeyer and Durham’s (2017) study on the effective role of the storytelling narrative in high school classrooms. For our storytelling unit, the students used many of these same skills to reveal their understanding and interpretation of the books of *The Odyssey*.

### **The Storytelling Unit**

The goal of our storytelling unit was for the students to create their own storytelling centered on one of the books of *The Odyssey*, focusing on not only the major plot events but also the motivations of the characters, the creation of a mood that fits the story, and details that would help students review the epic poem while being entertained and engaged. As previously mentioned, students began the unit after completing a Greek mythology research project to provide background knowledge and historical framework to understand the characters and places they would encounter throughout *The Odyssey*.

After the basic unit introduction, students read, reread, and discussed each section, or “book” of the epic poem in small groups or as a whole class. We introduced the Q-Matrix (Wiederhold & Kagan, 1998) which provided students with question starters at various levels of inquiry to support deeper discussion. The Q-Matrix is a chart of question stems for literal, inferential and extended questions to guide students as they discuss the text. After implementing this strategy, discussions moved away from questions such as, “What poor choice did Odysseus’ men make this time?” to “What might have motivated Odysseus’ men to open the bag of winds?” which led to the question, “How might Odysseus have prevented this from happening?” The latter questions reveal a deeper understanding of the text (Fisher & Frey, 2012) and become more rigorous than the simplistic comprehension questions previously used. These questions also furthered the discussions among group members, which allowed students to own their learning instead of waiting on us to guide them through the text. Finally, students chose a book of the epic poem from the options we offered to create a storytelling to present to their peers.

Students worked in teacher-selected groups of two or three to create and practice their storytelling

presentations. We provided a planning sheet (Figure 3) to support their initial organization of the story. They focused on analyzing the text to reveal the characters’ motivations, create a pertinent mood, connect with the audience, and provide accurate details.

Finally, students presented their stories. We tried to make the experience as authentic as possible by moving class outside to a courtyard located in the center of the high school that had tiered seating and a small concrete stage, resembling an amphitheater. Students were allowed to dress in costume if they chose. They completed a storytelling for Part I of *The Odyssey*, which served as a review for the paper test occurring the next day. Their storytellings for Part II of *The Odyssey* were used in place of a traditional unit test. Table 1 further details the unit.

### **Storytelling Engaged Students’ Interests**

One of the goals of any teacher is to engage her students because engaged students learn. Through our questionnaire, focus group, and self-evaluation, we gathered students’ opinions on the storytelling unit. Storytelling “made [English class] a more positive experience,” explained one student (Student Questionnaire). Many students stated that their attitudes toward English improved as a result of the storytelling unit. Because they enjoyed coming to class, they were more interested in learning about *The Odyssey*. Additionally, the more time students engaged in storytelling with their peers, the more comfortable they became with the activity.

However, there were students who reported that at first, they did not like storytelling because it was stressful to speak in front of their peers, and it was difficult to memorize the details of the story. Although one student commented, “I hate talking in front of the class,” another student stated, “I fought my fear of public speech” (Student Questionnaire). While several students initially reported that they disliked the performance part of the storytelling unit, their actions revealed a different tale. Teacher evaluations revealed that many of the students improved their storytelling performance skills (i.e., their speaking) while even more of them increased their knowledge of *The Odyssey* (i.e., their understanding of a complex text).

Through student self-reflections after each storytelling performance, most reported that their learning increased. One student stated, “[Storytelling] allowed me to present my knowledge of the story to my classmates through my perspective” (Student Questionnaire). Although utilizing storytelling can be intimidating to some students, the active engagement in learning improved their understanding of the text.

In the classroom, students who rarely or never volunteered previously began talking. Carrie (all names are pseudonyms), a quiet and introverted student, shocked all her peers with her excitement and animation as she shared the tale of Odysseus and his crew passing through the lair of Scylla, the ferocious monster with multiple heads. Her description and movements grabbed

her peers' attention, and they listened, captivated by this usually subdued classmate who suddenly came to life in front of them.

Other students, previously intimidated by complex texts, were able to extract major details from the story. Reggie, a student with a specific learning disability, could retell details of the epic poem that appeared impossible for him to understand before the storytelling. Not only could students retell major events, but also, they were able to create appropriate moods for their storytellings. They created eerie moods for moments when Odysseus faced unknown dangers and impassioned moods when Odysseus attacked the Cyclops, Polyphemus. They applauded each other as peers described the exciting or gory scenes, and they laughed when students retold humorous sections. In the end the students enjoyed the presentation portion of the unit.

When students are motivated and engaged in their learning, they can accomplish tasks and skills previously unattainable or latent. Because storytelling is an engaging activity, students enjoy participating even when they are at first hesitant. Storytelling is more than an individual learning experience, because it allows the opportunity for group co-construction of knowledge.

### **Storytelling Facilitated Collaboration and Social Interaction**

Molly, one voice of the many students who valued the collaborative aspect of this unit, said, "When you're working in a group, it's like you have those other people that have your back and like you can rely on" (Focus Group). Working as a group allowed them to ask for clarification, hear other points of view, rely on group members for support, and bounce ideas and energy off classmates. "We got to do more than just sit in class and we got to work with our peers and do some fun acting out," stated another student (Student Questionnaire).

As the teacher worked with students, she guided social interaction strategies (i.e., Q-Matrix & graphic organizers) enhanced learning, and supported storytelling presentations. We created graphic organizers, such as a planning sheet (Figure 3) to focus students while preparing their storytelling. By completing the planning guide, students could sequence ideas, provide descriptions of characters and settings, and determine how to create the mood of the story for the audience. Graphic organizers supported the students by helping them to focus on specific pieces of information needed to enhance their tales as they created their story and focused on rereading.

Purposeful rereading for understanding a complex text and preparing a storytelling is essential. One student wrote, "I liked that I had to go back and reread the story's [sic] which refreshed my knowledge" (Student Questionnaire). While students usually require extra prompting to reread a section multiple times, storytelling facilitates and necessitates this process naturally. Students need to reread small sections for discussion, but they also need to refresh their memory and further their understanding of the text to determine

the necessary pieces to give a coherent and entertaining storytelling. Rereading became less forced and more natural for students when they saw a direct and specific purpose for the process.

Storytelling engaged students in their learning and provided a space for them to construct knowledge as they interacted with a complex text. One student wrote, "I like how [storytelling] gave more insight into the text and put movement with the words" (Student Questionnaire). The storytelling unit created new opportunities for using sound educational practices to allow students to make sense of complex text.

Hinchman and Moore (2013) suggest multiple entry points for supporting students in understanding complex text. Our approach of using storytelling to access complex text relies on many of them. We provided a scaffolded approach to the topic with a unit on mythology as well as the use of graphic organizers to support thinking while reading and discussing. Students were purposely directed to reread the text in order to discuss it more accurately and to prepare for their storytelling rendition. This pedagogical approach combined individual reading with student-led small group discussion. Thus, storytelling became an engaging and supported approach to understanding complex text. We believe that storytelling has a place in high school classrooms as one pedagogical approach to teaching certain complex texts.

### **Suggestions for the Classroom**

Those who teach at the secondary level know that motivating students to read, write, and speak; engaging them in classroom activities; and providing them with skills to read complex texts are challenging goals to meet. While storytelling is not the perfect strategy for every text, through our classroom experiences we have determined some helpful hints for teaching with this method.

### **Choosing Appropriate Texts**

Within district curriculum guidelines, choose a text, whether classic or contemporary, that is complex but narrative in style. Myths or tales usually have been passed down through the oral tradition and are already opportune for this style of learning. Many classic texts, such as those by Homer or other Greek, Roman, or Native American writers, are already being taught in secondary classrooms. Some examples include *The Iliad*, *The Oedipus Plays*, *The Aeneid*, "The Sky Tree," or "Coyote Finishes his Work." When the text tells a story, the students can analyze and retell that story beyond sequential information. Choosing an appropriate text successfully launches the process of storytelling.

### **Modeling Strategies**

Modeling helps students to see teacher expectations explicitly. Teachers need to model and teach storytelling techniques through common classroom practices as we did throughout the unit. When possible, include personal anecdotes that relate to lessons. By incorporating voice

inflection and movements during instruction, teachers can model storytelling examples long before students need to use the skills to create their own stories. Allow students to practice storytelling as well. Instead of students sharing one or two details about themselves at the beginning of the year, ask them to tell an important or interesting personal story. Provide the opportunity to incorporate props, such as a bag with mementoes, allowing apprehensive students to focus on the objects rather than themselves while presenting.

### Creating and Presenting Stories

Creating a storytelling occurs after students have read, discussed, and reread their stories. Using graphic organizers allows students to reconstruct the plot while incorporating sensory images and details into their piece, which is key to a great storytelling but often forgotten by inexperienced storytellers. Students should not write out their stories verbatim, as it tempts them to memorize or read which stilt the presentation. Instead, they should create descriptive phrases and details. Writing out the opening and closing lines of their story assists students in developing strong beginnings and endings, which are important to a successful presentation.

Finding the right grouping of students is also important. Attempt to include an outgoing and a shy student in the same group. By requiring that all students present an equal part of the story, the varied personalities become advantageous.

Throughout the process, students need to move around the room, integrating hand gestures or movements to add to the story while changing the dynamics of their voices so that they create contrast, heighten interest, and invoke specific moods for their audience. These skills do not come naturally to most students, so it is important for them to practice the movements with the stories.

Choosing the area for presenting the stories should not cause stress. We have presented in the classroom due to uncooperative weather, but our best experiences have included our outdoor stage area built into a courtyard allowing a more authentic amphitheater-type setting. Avoid overwhelming students with too many audience members, but feel free to invite study hall students, primary students, or administrators to create a more realistic experience.

### Conclusion

The benefits of storytelling as a pedagogical practice are clear from our experiences. Storytelling piques students' interests, and those who are motivated are usually engaged in the activity and thus more likely to learn (Guthrie & McPeake, 2013). Students enjoyed collaborating to create storytellings and appreciated the epic poem coming alive in front of them. This collaboration allows students to co-construct knowledge and support each other while meeting literacy standards of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking. Storytelling becomes a natural way for students to make sense of complex text through working with the text, forming it into an engaging and accurate

storytelling by the students for their peers.

We encourage teachers to explore the use of storytelling with their high school students as they unpack complex texts, in the hope that they might hear, "[Storytelling] made me want to learn my story so I would be prepared to present. It made me eager to come to class" (Student Questionnaire).

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## Appendix

Figure 1. Self-Reflection Rubric

### *The Odyssey: Storytelling Presentations and Reflection*

Please complete the left side of the chart before the presentation. Then complete the right side following each presentation.

Story Title:

How comfortable do I feel with the details and important aspects of this story?	Now that I have watched the storytelling presentation . . .
<input type="checkbox"/> I never actually read it.	<input type="checkbox"/> I still do not feel as if I know it.
<input type="checkbox"/> I vaguely remember what it is about.	<input type="checkbox"/> I now remember most of the main points.
<input type="checkbox"/> I remember some of the main points but not many of the small details.	<input type="checkbox"/> I now remember the story and understand parts that were unclear before.
<input type="checkbox"/> I remember most of the main points of the story and many of the small details.	<input type="checkbox"/> I feel much more comfortable with the story and feel more prepared for a test.
<input type="checkbox"/> I <i>could be</i> telling this story because I remember it so well.	<input type="checkbox"/> Other comments:
<input type="checkbox"/> I <i>am</i> telling this story.	

Figure 2. Teacher-Evaluation Rubric

### *The Odyssey* Storytelling Project

Now that you have finished reading *The Odyssey*, it is important to make sure that you understood the epic poem. To assess your comprehension, you will complete a storytelling of one of the sections. You will use the rubric below to ensure that you earn the maximum amount of points. I will use this rubric to evaluate your presentation.

Story: \_\_\_\_\_ Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

Grading Rubric:

- /1 Introduction: strong, interesting introductory line
- /3 Content of Story: includes all major points and several details of the story
- /2 Characterization: clearly reveals at least one character's emotions and motivations to audience
- /2 Setting: clear description of setting
- /2 Expression and Voice: voices are expressive and change with the story, emphasizing key points and ideas or changes in character or plot
- /2 Audience Contact: audience members feel like they are important to the storytelling (through the use of eye contact and / or movement on the stage)
- /5 Equal Division of Parts between group members
- /2 Preparation: storytellers are practiced
- /1 Closing: leaves audience with a specific and / or thoughtful feeling or emotion
- /X Listening Skills: storytellers are respectful audience members (Failure to do this results in a deduction of points)
- / 20 Total Points

Presentation Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3. Storytelling Planning Sheet

Names of Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

Story: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Presentation: \_\_\_\_\_

Introduction to Story (First Line): \_\_\_\_\_

Storytelling Focus: \_\_\_\_\_

Order of Main Events in Story divided by Storyteller (use as many as needed):

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10.

Specific Descriptions and / or Emotions to Include:

Closing Line of Story (Last Line): \_\_\_\_\_

Other Notes: