



Dr. Patricia Edgar

Why storytelling works

There is no doubt about the power of characters in a good story to develop children's interest and creativity.

Remember the Fonz in the popular television series *Happy Days*? When he took out a library card, the American Library Association reported a 400 per cent increase in card applications from children and teenagers. We need him to return, for there is no doubt about the power of characters in a good story and the potential of storytelling to develop children's interest and creativity.

Storytelling through books and television used to be something we all took for granted, but in the United States a group of Hollywood veterans and experts from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology fear its demise. They believe the internet, mobile phones, video games and multi-channel television are rewiring young brains and eroding children's abilities to focus on complex narratives. They suggest YouTube has more appeal than a good film or book.

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These media certainly have become a focus of children's life experience. They love the bizarre and funny videos they find on YouTube; they enjoy the incessant communication with peers while on the run, updating one another with viral speed. Even primary school students are discovering the joys of creating their own simple stories, music clips or slices of life to upload to the site and then study the number of hits they get. Young people have taken ownership of this technology and see it as their own. But this does not mean they don't still love a good story.

Stories are essential: throughout human history they have been the glue that binds us together in a community. They give children a shared purpose and teach them about their place in the world. Stories stimulate the child's imagination and open up the infinite opportunities and potential that life presents.

It isn't difficult to discourage reading when so many books are depressingly insubstantial. Boring, technical, repetitive writing in some school texts; the sanitising of stories that once were meaningful roadmaps for life; and the lack of enthusiasm for reading when parents can't be bothered all make it unsurprising that many children don't want to read.

But read they must or they are handicapped for life. One of the most important teaching tasks in the early years is to engender a love of reading through well-chosen stories that will introduce children to the private pleasure of a rich fantasy world and motivate them to want to visit that world on their own. Developing imagination, Albert Einstein concluded, is more important than imparting knowledge.

When I was a child, my favourite time of day was when the lights went out at night and I was left to indulge my own imaginings without interruption. Nothing was impossible in my dreams. I know now how important those times were to my development and understanding of life. ■

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