

Narrative Elements Plus Storytelling Equals Creativity

Joseph Parrett

Introduction:

You know that bowl of left-over pasta in the back of your refrigerator? You can pull it out, warm it up and have an easy meal with minimal effort. This sort of meal is lacking in creativity. It is also similar to writing in kindergarten. When I ask my students to explain their writing to me they will respond with things like: “Spongebob made Squidward mad.”, “Elsa made this snowman who likes hugs”, or “John Cena won the wrestling match.” While this is a fine rehash of what they have seen or heard, it lacks creativity much like the day old spaghetti.

Personally, my favorite pasta is ravioli. I especially enjoy mushroom ravioli smothered in a rich cheese sauce. Much as I’ve sampled a variety of pastas at dinner time so too have I worked in many different schools throughout my teaching career. I feel especially lucky to have ended up in the mushroom ravioli of all schools. I work at Kathleen Wilbur elementary school in Bear, Delaware. Wilbur is a K-5 public school of almost 1,200 students. The school draws its population from a wide stretch of the Colonial School District. Our 1,200 come from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. I teach kindergarten. Class sizes in kindergarten at Wilbur generally range from between 16 and 24. My class last year included 19 students, ten female and nine male. In the class, one child was receiving speech support services, three received services as English language learners (ELL), and one needed extra support for behavioral issues. Despite their differences one commonality is that they were all five or six years old and were eager to begin their school experience. I anticipate a similar class make-up this year. My students deserve the opportunity to fully enjoy the mushroom ravioli that is Wilbur and I believe this enjoyment begins with engaging lessons.

Rationale:

Kindergartners are new to many academic challenges. One weakness that I definitely notice is the lack of creativity. I also noted creativity lacking in third and fourth graders as well when I taught at those grade levels. My thinking is that if I can introduce creative storytelling in kindergarten, those seeds of creativity will flourish throughout my students’ academic careers.

When I have asked my students in the past to write or tell a story, they most always fall back on relating the events of a story with which they are familiar. This can be useful because they are still practicing several writing skills as they put their ideas to paper.

They are forming letters and words, using capitalization, practicing sounding out words to spell, and using punctuation. They are however not being creative.

I would like my students to begin creating stories. Of course, through the process of creating we will also be practicing those aforementioned writing skills. It may be useful to clarify the definition of writing in respects to a kindergarten class. In the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), writing in kindergarten is always expressed as a combination of drawing, narrating, and writing. The students are so young and develop at different rates. At any given time during writing a child could be drawing a scene while another is telling a story to a dictating me and a third may be using sight words and their sounding out skills to put their own words into a sentence. All of these children are engaged in writing, according to the CCSS. The class will be writing for this unit but how does that tie into *Things that Happen in Fiction*?

Seminar leader Teague focused our early seminars on the narrative elements of character, setting, and plot. These elements are also introduced during the fall of the kindergarten year. My intention is to showcase quality children's literature (i.e. picture books) that will aid me in introducing these terms to the class.

Writing in the beginning of the kindergarten year generally takes the following form; introduce a new sight word. Write a sentence using the new word leaving the end of the sentence open for a child's input. Then have the students copy and complete the sentence in a notebook. For example, when I introduce the sight word "to", I may have the children copy and complete this sentence "I go to the _____." While this is certainly a useful strategy for teaching the word "to", practicing handwriting, and forming the concept of sentence, it is not all that creative.

By combining lessons on the narrative elements with storytelling and writing, I hope to jumpstart the creativity of my students. Instead of copying sentences my class will be designing characters. Those characters will then be central to storytelling that could also utilize our sight words. Imagine if a child created a friendly monster (character) named Bob. The child can then further develop Bob and practice with the word "to" by writing "Bob likes to eat candy." This sort of writing is practicing using the word "to", but it also reinforces the concept of character, and develops creativity. An added and incredibly important bonus of this activity is that the student will be highly engaged in sharing ideas (which they will create) about their own character, Bob.

Concepts:

Characters

In kindergarten, I define the term character as "the people or animals in a story". This is a simplification but it is appropriate to a kindergarten audience. I also extend characters to

inanimate objects by sharing the example of Lightning McQueen from the movie *Disney's Cars*. I explain that since Lightning acts like a person. He is a character as well.

Seminar Leader Teague spoke of flat and round characters during seminar. The idea of flat and round characters comes from the book *Aspects of the Novel* by E.M. Forster. I found this to be an interesting distinction between characters. "Flat characters are simple and they can usually be described with one sentence. Their actions are predictable. Round characters are believable even when they surprise the reader. A round character should indeed be capable of surprising the reader."¹

Many beloved characters from children's literature are of the flat type. That is not to imply that they are bad characters. In fact, Forster wrote of two advantages that flat characters have over more rounded characters. "One great advantage of flat characters is that they are easily recognized." "A second advantage is that they are easily remembered by the reader afterwards."² It is little wonder to me that children fall in love with so many flat characters, they can be trusted to act a certain way and infrequently disappoint a child's expectations. Examples of flat characters are Winnie the Pooh in his eternal quest for "hunny" and Superman and his never ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way.

Setting

I define the term setting as "where and when the story takes place". Kindergarten students generally understand setting as where something happens. They often do not consider the when part of the definition. Setting is remarkably important to a story. "The setting of a picturebook establishes the situation and the nature of the world"³ Furthermore, "setting can strongly contribute to and clarify the conflict in a story."⁴

As readers we can also learn much of a character by closely examining certain settings. For example, if part of the story is set in the character's house we can learn much about the character by closely examining the picture on the page or the written description of the home. Is the character neat or sloppy? What types of things are important to the character? Settings often drive the plot and are also often a reflection of the characters in the story.

Plot

Plot is what happens in a story, the events. Simplistically for kindergarten, plot is what happens at the beginning of the story, what happens in the middle, and what happens at the end of the story. To a young child plot is the story. It is a telling of the character's adventure.

The beginning of the story is generally where we are introduced to the main character or characters. For example, we might discover that George is a monkey and he lives with his friend the Man in the Yellow Hat. It is also typically where the characters encounter a problem. George is a curious monkey and he wanders off following whatever has captured his attention.

In the middle of the story the characters attempt to solve whatever problem has befallen them. George causes trouble as he attempts to satisfy his curiosity. The monkey maneuvers his way through obstacle after obstacle causing trouble (much to the delight of children everywhere) while the Man in the Yellow Hat attempts to locate George. The middle of the plot is the most substantial part of the story.

The end of the story is generally where the problems are resolved. George miraculously cleans up his messes, sates his thirst for knowledge, and is reunited with the Man in the Yellow Hat. Sometimes the characters learn a lesson that changes them from how they were at the beginning of the story. Sometimes the characters just return home to repeat the mistakes of the adventure in the next chapter, episode, or book in the series.

Especially in children's literature, this is a winning formula. Kids are comfortable with this story trajectory and love that while the specifics may change the nature of the story; problem, attempts to solve, resolution often holds true. Dora the Explorer has long been a favorite of my classes. My students know even before cracking the book that Dora will be going on a trip. They rightfully anticipate that Dora will experience three obstacles while conducting her journey. She will, with help from her friends, overcome her challenges and in the end will joyously reach her objective.

Storytelling

“Storytelling is a creative art form that has entertained and informed across centuries and cultures.”⁵ Storytelling also requires great creativity and is the precursor to much writing. Kindergartners are only just developing the most rudimentary of writing skills. At five or six years of age they cannot yet put pen to paper and craft a tale. They just have not had the opportunity to learn and practice with the requisite skills to successfully do so. They can however be guided to tell a story orally. This oral storytelling paired with dictation by the teacher or another adult is considered writing at the kindergarten level. It is my belief that students will benefit greatly by participating in the creative activity of storytelling. The more practice they can get at creative storytelling the stronger they will be at writing when their skills in that area have sufficiently developed.

While researching storytelling and creativity I came across a paper by Charlotte Doyle that was delivered at the American Psychological Association Meetings in August of 1989. Doyle took the interesting approach of not studying the finished products of children, but rather of examining the process of getting children to develop stories. I

found this study interesting. The process of storytelling she studied began with dictation. I was drawn to this process because dictation is such a major piece of the CCSS of writing in kindergarten. The instructor made a small “book” by folding paper and invited students to orally relate a story as she recorded the words in the “book”. At first many children were reluctant to participate, but as the class watched classmates dictating to the adult they became much more interested in participating themselves. Dictation is a wonderful activity. It gives the child an opportunity to hold the undivided attention of the adult while providing the recorder with a snapshot of the child’s mind while they spin their yarn.

It may seem very obvious but a good prompt to begin the storytelling process is to say “How does the story begin?” The child will begin their tale. In the beginning the story may only be a simple sentence stating an occurrence. If the child appears stuck but with more to say, rereading what has been written thus far is a great strategy to spur them on. Once the simple story is done, the child will come up with a title which will then be dictated. It is then the child’s duty to create artwork that is appropriate to the tale. As the child continues the process through multiple turns at storytelling, the stories tend to grow from a single sentence to longer and more detailed stories.

What do the children draw upon in the creation of their stories? According to Doyle there are a few sources of inspiration taken right from the child’s own life. They sometimes relate familiar cultural sources. An example could be a child relating a story about a holiday that the family celebrates. Children will also piggyback on the stories of other classmates. If a child tells a story about a trip to the beach, another may share a story of their trip to the beach. Sometimes stories spin from everyday routines. Someone could tell a story about riding the bus to school. Another recurrent theme in early stories is a memorable experience. Many children share their adventures from the first time they visited Disney World to the time they discovered a treasured, shiny rock in the backyard. Things that are currently going on in a child’s life are also a common source for stories. If the class is getting ready for a field trip, the students may tell many stories about apple orchards or pumpkin patches that their characters could visit. A last source of story material is wish fulfillment. Most kids can relate a story in which candy or toys are being obtained. Of course a lot of young storytellers combine elements from several of these sources to craft their tale.

Sometimes children retell stories with which they are familiar. In a first attempt at storytelling, children may just imitate what they have recently heard. They may simply retell a story in their own words. Actually, this is a skill that we teach in school as a way to check comprehension of a text. It is just not the most creative way of making a story. With some guidance, a child can take that well known story and alter it. They could retell the story but change the ending. They could add extra events into the middle of a story. They could even attempt to retell the basic story pattern while substituting new characters or a setting perhaps. An example of this could be a story entitled Bob (remember our

student created, monster friend) and the Three Little Pigs. Taking a familiar story and making it their own would be a valuable creative exercise for any young storyteller.

Objectives:

Over the course of this unit the students will be practicing many skills in the writing, speaking, and reading literature strands of the Common Core. I will focus on five major objectives for this unit.

The first objective is simply to have my students write (as defined in the CCSS) a story. In the fall, I would anticipate that most students who are able to relate a story will surely be focused on just a single event. It is my hope that as we practice and develop creativity in storytelling that we could possibly move to loosely linked events by the spring.

The second goal is to begin students in the process of improving a written piece of work. This is the beginning of peer editing. Students will be focused on improving their use of writing conventions. In kindergarten we check to see if sight words are being spelled correctly, punctuation is used properly, spacing between words is appropriate, and capital letters are used where needed. Students may also wish to consider peer and teacher comments pertaining to content. For example, does something in the narrative need more explanation?

My third objective is to expose the children to a variety of means of publishing and producing a story. Of course we will use the traditional paper and pencil but I also want my students to begin exploring digital publishing. I'll discuss specifics of this in the strategies section of this unit.

The next aim of the unit will support our reading literature efforts. The kids and I will be learning about the narrative elements of character, setting, and plot. We will be defining these terms, generating lists of characters and settings, and breaking down plot into beginning, middle, and end. Major events will occur in all three portions of the story.

Finally, we will focus on speaking and communicating in a clear manner. With all the dictating and sharing of stories woven throughout this unit, our objective will be addressed repeatedly. The students will need to speak to and be understood by the teacher and other students. They will also need to speak fluently and clearly while using some of the digital resources which we will be using for our storytelling.

Essential Questions

What are characters and how do they add to a story?

A student should respond with “the people or animals in a story”. They could further explain that without any characters there would be no story as they provide the action and drive the plot.

What is the setting and how does it affect the story?

A possible answer would be that setting is “where and when a story takes place”. It should be further understood that both the place and the time of year could affect the events that occur in the plot of a story.

What are the three parts of the plot and how do they work together to tell a story?

The student should show some knowledge that the plot has a beginning where we meet the characters and they have a problem. The plot also includes a middle in which the characters attempt to solve the problem. The plot concludes with the ending which is when the characters solve the problems.

How can we make our writing better?

Students should be able to express that we can make our writing better by adding details, including all narrative elements that we have discussed (character, setting, plot), and by following the conventions that we have learned about. They may further demonstrate knowledge that by sharing our story with others we can make it better.

What are some ways that we can publish our stories?

We will explore both pencil and paper (could be written, narrated, or drawn) and digital storytelling as way to publish our stories.

Strategies

Listening Comprehension

In kindergarten the students cannot read a story. They are asked to comprehend stories. This takes the form of listening comprehension. As a teacher reads a story, students are expected to follow along paying special attention to details from the text and the pictures that accompany the words. Some of the details that I could specifically ask probing questions about are the characters, the setting, and the events from the beginning, middle, and end of the story.

When we discuss characters, students should know what the characters are. Are they people, animals, robots, talking plants, cars, toys come to life, or any other such thing?

Students could be asked to draw an image of the characters as well. This can be quite tough for them especially in the beginning of the year.

Setting is also questioned. I teach setting as where and when the story occurs. Students should be able to describe where a story takes place and what the setting is like. As kindergartners are just beginning to learn writing skills, this description will be given verbally or as a detailed (such as they are able) drawing. They should also be able to discuss when the story takes place; winter, summer, day, night, time of day, day of week, a long time ago, in the future, something along these lines. They may be asked to justify their response by explaining their thinking. For example, "I think it is in the past because people are riding horses and wagons." I would consider this an excellent response.

The plot will be explored. In kindergarten we may ask questions such as what event happened first, or right after *fill in the blank* happened, what happened next? Asking the child to retell the plot of a story is a great way to check for comprehension.

Peer Editing

Peer editing is taught by modeling how to edit a piece of writing. We will be using a simple checklist to aid in editing. The checklist includes the following items. Uses finger spaces, uses the lines on the paper to form letters, spells sight words correctly, includes punctuation, and capital letters used where needed. I will also model how to ask question where more details would be beneficial to the story. Basically, if there is something a child is having difficulty understanding they should ask for clarification.

Digital Publishing

My room is fortunate enough to have access to a few I-Pads. We use an app called *Book Creator* which is available for a couple of dollars in the App Store. With the book creator students can be taught to take a picture of their art or writing. They can then import the picture to the *Book Creator* and record their voice telling the story that goes along with that page of the narrative. It is a powerful tool that allows students to be independent storytellers. It also addresses the speaking and listening standard from the CCSS. In addition to these benefits it also really ups the engagement of the lesson as the kids love to record their voices to the device.

Kindergarten Writing

Recall that kindergarten writing is a combination of drawing, narrating, and writing. When I engage students in creative writing I like to begin by having them draw a picture. I require that the picture contain details and most usually color. The student will then write about the picture they have created. I can sometimes get additional writing out of them by asking about the details that they included in their artwork. Early in the year this

writing often takes the form of dictation. As we move into winter and then spring, the child is required to attempt writing on their own first and then I can dictate beneath their written words as they share their story.

Classroom Activities

My unit will consist of three introductory lessons on the narrative elements. The lessons should take three or four days each and can easily be repeated as needed with different readings. I intend the culminating activity to be a lesson that is repeated throughout the year to give my students multiple chances to create and produce stories. I believe this repetition will enable my students' creativity to flourish.

Lesson One, Day One: Characters. This initial lesson will occur in the fall of the kindergarten year. On the first day of the lesson I will guide the students in defining character. I will kick off the introduction of the narrative elements with a short video that I created. In the video a puppet will go over and define the narrative elements. This video can be found at the following link; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-ghd95F0KI>. After watching this video I will have students report back to me the definition of character. This class definition will be recorded on chart paper and posted in the classroom. We will then read a story that features multiple characters. The students will then name the characters and we will test them against our new definition. For this activity I plan on using a book like Winnie the Pooh or Dora the Explorer. Both of these series features several characters which the children will know well, prior to our reading. Dora is a particularly good choice as it also includes the characters of Backpack and Map. Neither of whom are people or animals, but both of whom behave in a human way.

Lesson One, Day Two: Characters. I will initiate day two by reviewing our class definition of character. I will then read a different story from the previous day, but a story that is rich in characters. At the conclusion of the reading, students will generate a list of the characters in the tale. I will record this list on the smartboard (though a sheet of chart paper would work just as well). At the conclusion of this activity, I will provide each child with a piece of paper and direct them to return to their desks. Students will draw a picture of their favorite character from a book, TV show, movie, etc... and then attempt to label the drawing with the name of their choice. Students will then bring their completed pictures to the carpet area and share their work with the class. I will then add these names to our list of characters.

Lesson One, Day Three: Characters: After reviewing the definition of character and recalling some characters from our list generated on day two, the students will create their own original character. To aid them in this process I'll provide a worksheet which will contain some outlines of bodies. I would provide a "boy" outline, a "girl" outline, and the outline of a monster body (picture a Grover or Cookie Monster shape from Sesame Street). The children will then cut out and add details to their character. This will

make the character their creation. The final step of making the physical representation of their character will be to paste it to a craft stick. The student will now have a puppet of their character. Following the creation of their puppet character, the students will need to name their creation.

Lesson two will follow the same formula as lesson one. During the initial day of lesson two, the class will watch again the video on narrative elements found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-ghd95F0KI>. On this second viewing however we shift our focus to the element of setting. At the conclusion of the video, the class will define the term setting. An appropriate definition would be “when and where a story takes place”. I will record this definition on the smartboard or chart paper. We could then read a story with a distinctive setting. A possible choice could be “The Lorax” by Dr. Seuss. This setting has a very distinctive look thanks to the stylized artwork. We could then discuss what we noticed about the setting. We may also want to look at a book with a setting in a different time. Perhaps a story about dinosaurs that occurred long, long ago would work well.

On the second day we will review our definition of setting and then read another story that will have a distinctive backdrop. I will be using Maurice Sendak’s “Where the Wild Things Are”. I like this book for setting because it has two very different locations. The first being Max’s home, and the second the land of the wild things. Following the story reading we will generate a list of possible settings. I will be doing this in the manner of a game. The game will be a simple, “I will name a character and let’s see if you can tell me where they usually are” question and answer session. In my experience, challenging the kids with a question like that and calling it a game will engage them. A pair of examples are; “Batman lives in?” (Gotham City) and “Spongebob lives in a pineapple...?” (under the sea). I will record the list of settings.

The third day will be when the students create a setting for their character (that they created in lesson one). We will review the definition of setting and our list of settings. After the review I will guide the class through a brainstorming session of possible settings we could make. Examples of setting could be a city, forest, beach, zoo, mall, etc... I’ll provide each child with a large piece of white construction paper. They will have the opportunity to artistically create their own setting. I will provide a variety of materials with which they may work. I usually put out crayons, colored pencils, markers, paints (usually watercolors), and multicolored construction paper with glue sticks (these last two are great for creating ripped paper art, which is exactly as it sounds).

Lesson three will again begin with the narrative element video found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-ghd95F0KI>. On our third viewing we will focus on the element of plot. Defining plot may require a bit more guidance than either character or setting. The definition we will be working towards is something similar to “the events or things that happen in a story”. We will further explain that the plot has

three parts. In kindergarten we only focus on beginning, middle, and end. Other elements of plot like rising action and climax will be addressed in a later grade. I will explain that usually in the beginning we meet the character and discover some sort of problem. The middle is when the character tries to solve the problem. The end is where the problem is usually solved. Many picture books that are explored in the primary grades fit this pattern.

The second day will find us reading a simple story (possibly Curious George) and recording the events of the plot. I'll use a tri-folded paper for this recording. In the first section I will draw a picture showing the problem. I will also write a sentence underneath my art telling about the problem. The center part of the tri-fold shows the character trying to solve the problem. Again, I will be writing a sentence on the bottom of the drawing relating to what the character is doing. The solving of the problem will be drawn and written in the final portion of the trifold. I will then hang this paper near our lists of characters and settings.

For the last day of lesson three, students will receive a brand new tri-fold paper. They will then create a story for their character. They will have to draw and write about the problem their character will experience. Students will show and write about how the character attempts to solve their problem. They will also have to reveal how the problem is solved at the end of the plot. Of course as is the case with all kindergarten writing, this writing will be a combination of dictating, writing, and working from the pictures.

Lesson four is the culminating activity of my unit. In lesson four the students will combine all of our narrative elements to create a story. My students will take their puppet character (lesson one) and place it atop their setting paper (lesson two). They will then tell their story (lesson three). Students will then practice telling their stories over and over until they can relate the story fluently. These storytellings will be produced using an app called Book Creator.

The Book Creator process will work like this for the class. A student will use an I-pad to photograph their character atop the setting background. This photo can then be imported into the app. The app then allows students to record their voice on the page. My students will be creating the art and narrative for a story in the Book Creator. For our first attempt, I would expect students to produce a one page story. As the class becomes more proficient at telling stories and using the Book Creator app, I hope to have them make multiple page tales.

Appendix

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

W.K.3 Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.

W.K.5 With guidance and support from adults, respond to questions and suggestions from peers and add details to strengthen writing as needed.

W.K.6 With guidance and support from adults, explore a variety of digital tools to produce and publish writing, including collaboration with peers.

RL.K.3 With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.

SL.K.6 Speak audibly and express thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly.

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Notes

¹ Petri Lanski, Satu Helio, and Inger Ekman, *Characters in Computer Games: Toward Understanding Interpretation and Design*, 2.

² E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 105 .

³ Maria Nikolajeva and Scott Carole, *How Picturebooks Work*, 61.

⁴ Maria Nikolajeva and Scott Carole, *How Picturebooks Work*, 70.

⁵ Walter Fisher, *The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning*.

Curriculum Unit
Title

Narrative Elements Plus Storytelling Equals Creativity

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KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.

Understanding that the elements of a story can help me create my own stories.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT

How can I use the narrative elements to create a story of my own?

CONCEPT A

Narrative Elements

CONCEPT B

Writing with Details

CONCEPT C

Publishing

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A

What are the narrative elements?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B

How can adding details to my writing make my writing better?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C

What are some ways I can publish my own story?

VOCABULARY A

Character
Setting
Plot

VOCABULARY B

Details
Conventions

VOCABULARY C

Publish
Draft
Narrative

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-ghd95f0kl>