



Does Oral Storytelling Help First Graders Become Better Writers?

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Abstract:

The purpose of this project was to determine the influence of oral storytelling on our students' writing in first grade. We modeled storytelling for our first grade students and then asked them to tell their own stories to classmates. Following the oral storytelling, the students were asked to write their stories. The storytelling took place each morning, October through January, for approximately fifteen minutes before Writer's Workshop. The students' writing was evaluated prior to introducing oral storytelling and at the conclusion of our study. We found that oral storytelling improved our students' writing in the areas of organization, style and content. After sharing their stories verbally their stories were longer and contained more details.

Table of Contents

Rationale	2
Context	2
Literature Review	3
Methodology	5
Findings	8
Implications and Conclusions	10
References	12

Rationale

We are two first grade teachers in different buildings in the Westerville school district. Between the two of us we have seventeen years of teaching experience. Yet we still struggle with our students' growth in writing. Most of the students master the simple mechanics of writing, such as capitals, spaces and ending punctuation. However, we would like them to write more, have a sense of story, and use more descriptive words. Ideally, we would like to hear their voice in their writing.

Many of our first grade students write one sentence when asked to write a story. Some students groan when asked to write something. How can we get our students to write more? How can we motivate our students to want to write and to enjoy writing? Many of our students say that they can not think of an idea for a story. How can we help them with this? How can we help our students grow as writers?

For the past several years, we have integrated ideas from two well known authors on Writer's Workshop. Calkins (2003) focuses on what writers do to convey a message. Cleveland (2004) teaches students to write like authors by studying various authors and then encouraging them to do some of those things in their own writing. We love these concepts and have been able to integrate them into our own Writer's Workshops. Our students seem to enjoy learning about writers and authors.

After discussing the article "*What's Important When You're Six?*" – *Valuing Children's Oral Stories* (Csak, 2002) with colleagues in a graduate class, we began to wonder if we should add her ideas to our workshop repertoire. We wanted to see if adding oral storytelling would help our students write more and become better writers. We wondered what the effect of oral storytelling would be on students' writing in first grade. Would students' writing scores for content, organization, and style be higher if they engaged in oral storytelling prior to writing? Would students' attitudes about writing improve when engaging in oral storytelling prior to writing?

Context

We conducted our study at two elementary schools in the [Westerville City School District](#). Westerville is the tenth largest district in Ohio with a student population of 14,256. It was rated "Effective" on the [2006-2007 School Year Report Card](#).

We teach in self contained, first grade classrooms at schools which house over 600 students each. Almost all of the students come from two-parent, middle-income families with only three of the students from both schools receiving services from the free lunch program. Teresa's class

consists of twenty-three students; (13 boys, 10 girls). One child is African American, another student is of Asian descent, one is bi-racial, and the rest are Caucasian. Kim's class consists of twenty-four students; (11 boys, 13 girls). Two children are African-American, one is bi-racial, two are of Asian descent, and the rest are Caucasian. All of the students in these classes are fluent in English.

Literature Review

After we discussed the article “*What’s Important When You’re Six?*” – *Valuing Children’s Oral Stories* by Csak (2002), we began to wonder how we could use this idea in our classrooms. We wanted to see if adding oral storytelling would help our students become better writers. Prior to her study, Csak had done research on oral language development. She concluded that oral language is necessary for developing literacy and that children who were the most successful with oral language were the most successful with reading and writing. In Csak’s article she describes oral language as an autobiographical narrative. She asked her students to be storytellers and to tell stories about their lives. She felt that oral storytelling was important in her students’ lives, because it allowed them to make connections with one another and it gave them the feeling of belonging. Seeing themselves as being able to contribute and feeling a sense of self worth was something else she discovered when engaging her students in oral storytelling. Csak also found that through oral storytelling her students made connections between spoken language and written language. Her students realized that whatever they told in a story could also be written. Students, who early on could not think of anything to write, now found that whatever they had told during storytelling could now be written down. She also stated that giving the students a chance to talk helps them to develop a voice in their writing. Csak concluded that students often wrote in their journals about the stories they told during oral storytelling.

Storytelling

While researching the professional literature for our study, we investigated storytelling and oral language as well as writing. The Committee on Storytelling, a group sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), defines storytelling as relating a tale to listeners using voice and gestures (1992). They believe that storytelling should be included in school because they believe that anyone who can speak can tell a story. According to Horn (2005), oral storytelling is a natural way into writing for young children. Tompkins (2003) believes that storytelling is an innate skill that teachers can model and nurture in their students.

... anyone who can speak can tell a story.



Motivation

Children’s attitudes about themselves play a major role in their literacy learning according to Bottomley, Henk, and Melnick (1997/1998). Woodard (2002) stated that storytelling is a tool that can build students’ self-confidence and that history of educational techniques supports his

opinion that storytelling has been proven the most successful teaching and motivational tool. Children who may not feel as successful academically as others in their class can be wonderful storytellers (Committee on Storytelling, 1992). Allen (2006) found that the boys in her boys' "literacy lunches" really enjoyed sharing their writing with one another and that they just wanted to be heard. Poindexter and Oliver (1998/1999) argued that writing develops faster when children write for their own purposes. They concur with other experts that students write more if they choose the topic rather than having a teacher assign the topic. Foltz (2007) wanted her

Children who may not feel as successful academically as others in their class can be wonderful storytellers.

students to want to write. She felt by giving the students' choice in their topics, they would write more. In her study, choice came from the students' personal lives. In Jones's study (2002), she stated that literacy learning could occur through social relationships with peers. Engaging in conversation can help students who are learning to write.

Oral Language & Prewriting

Tompkins (2003) states that by listening to and participating in storytelling, children are able to make connections about what they see in print. Storytelling can also help students become better writers by modeling how language works and how stories are constructed. Students can practice bringing their stories to life orally before writing them. Horn (2005) believes that storytelling – a specific time set aside for the oral composing of texts – is the chance for young children to think through, plan, discover, and develop a story that they may eventually choose to write. The Committee on Storytelling (1992) stated that for some children, the comfort of an oral tale could be the path by which they can reach the written tale. They concluded that it is believed that children who search their memories for details as they are telling an oral story will later be able to put those details into their writing. According to Foltz (2007), her students said that it helped when they could talk about their ideas. Meeting to listen to each other and ask

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questions helped them to expand and generate ideas. Poindexter and Oliver (1998/1999) suggested that pre-writing should begin with daily events in the students' lives. Sitting knee-to-knee and eye-to-eye and telling personal stories is a way for students to pre-write. According to Graham et. al. (2006), writing is described as a complex process that needs to include planning. Oral storytelling is a way for young students to plan.



Methodology

Pre-storytelling Phase

Our study took place for a period of three months. The first month consisted of collecting baseline data. We collected writing samples, anecdotal observations, conducted writing conferences and. students filled out writing surveys. The next two months were spent introducing oral storytelling and collecting data. The data once again consisted of writing samples, writing surveys, anecdotal observations, and writing conferences.

Writer's Workshop:

The project began with initiating a Writer's Workshop time. During Writer's Workshop, 15 minute mini-lessons were taught on topics and students were given 30 to 40 minutes of writing time. The students were given the opportunity to choose the topic and were encouraged to try the strategies that were presented during the mini-lesson. ([Click here to return to Chronology.](#))

Writing survey:

Students filled out a writing survey to give us an idea of how they felt about writing and about their abilities as writers. The desired outcome was to see how students felt about themselves as writers prior to starting this study as well as after the study. When creating the writing survey the idea of a smiley face, a straight face and a sad face was borrowed from Foltz's (2007) study. The students were to color in the face that best matched their feelings on each topic. A smiley face which was equal to positive feelings was assigned three points, the straight face which was equal to a neutral feeling was assigned two points, and the sad face which was equal to negative feelings was assigned one point for scoring purposes.

([Click here to return to Chronology.](#))

Chronology

October: Pre-storytelling Phase

- Introduce [Writer's Workshop](#)
- Conduct [writing survey](#)
- Conduct individual [writing conferences](#)
- Make [anecdotal observations](#)
- Collect [writing samples](#)

November thru January: Storytelling Phase

- Introduce oral [storytelling](#)
- Conduct oral storytelling sessions
- Conduct individual writing conferences
- Make anecdotal observations
- Collect writing samples
- Conduct writing survey

Writing Survey	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I like writing stories.			
I like to write in my spare time.			
I like writing at school.			
It's fun to write things at home.			
Writing is fun.			
I wish I had more time to write at school.			
I think I'm a good writer.			
I like to write.			

Writing conferences:

Conferences took place during the 30 to 40 minute writing time. During conferences, we took notes on what individual students were doing, not doing and/or confusing. During that time, we talked to the students about their writing. We started a conversation with a child by asking them to read their story to us. When they were finished sharing their writing, we always complimented them on something they were doing right. After that, we would choose one writing strategy that would help the student improve their writing such as, adding details or focusing on one topic. We always tried to help the student decide if they had a beginning, middle and end to their story. Of course, we were always asking the students about what they needed at the beginning of their sentence. What do you need at the end of your sentence? Conventions of print were always in the back of our minds, but we wanted the students to think about this for themselves. If we had a child that was writing without spaces between their words, we would try to get them to tell us why it was so hard for us to read their story. Sometimes we would ask, “Who do writers write for?” and the student would say, “Other readers.” That was a way for us to get them to realize that someone other than them needed to be able to read their story. Writing conferences were conducted with four to five students a day, which allowed us time to meet with an individual student about once a week. We used these conferences as a way to decide on the focus of our next mini lesson for Writer’s Workshop. ([Click here to return to Chronology.](#))

Anecdotal observations:

We watched the students during oral storytelling and during writing time. We took notes on our observations. ([Click here to return to Chronology.](#))

Observations:

- Interactions between students
- Students’ attitudes towards sharing
- Students’ attitudes towards writing
- Students’ time on task vs. off task behaviors

Writing samples:

Student writing folders were collected and all of the “books” that they had written were collected as writing samples. A rubric, designed by Westerville City Schools for assessing first and second grade writing, was used to assess the students’ writing. This writing rubric would be used again when assessing the students’ writing after storytelling, in order to compare their writing with and without oral storytelling. The rubric has five categories: process, content, organization, style, and conventions. Each section is scored with a one, two, three, or a four. A one means that the student needs support from the teacher and cannot perform independently, a two means that the student can perform independently some of the time, a three means that the student frequently can perform independently, and a four means that the student performs independently consistently. For the purpose of this study, the scores for content, organization, and style were used to look for progress in the students’ writing. ([Click here to return to Chronology.](#))

Storytelling Phase

Oral storytelling was introduced to our classes; the focus was on what storytellers do and what listeners do. The discussion included the storyteller making eye contact, projecting his voice to be heard, and using hand gestures and inflections in the voice to make the story interesting to the listener. Expectations were also set about the listener sitting quietly, making eye contact, and leaning towards the storyteller in order to show interest in what the storyteller is saying. The appropriate behavior was modeled. This was done by sitting on the floor with the students and asking three of them to sit knee-to-knee and eye-to-eye with us while we told a personal story. After the example, students were asked what they noticed, and these observations were discussed. Rules for oral storytelling were also discussed: one person talks at a time, be polite, be a good listener, be a good storyteller.



Students were instructed to meet with other students from their tables in a location that was assigned as their storytelling area. During storytelling, we took notes on what we observed. Observations did not include “hovering” over the groups, they were done from afar. The goal was to make the students feel comfortable and free to tell their stories. After 15 minutes, we checked in with each group and instructed the groups to finish up and made sure that everyone had a turn. The students then returned to their seats to begin writing their stories. Storytelling meetings were held four days per week.

([Click here to return to Chronology.](#))

Findings

The purpose of this study was to see if adding oral storytelling to Writer’s Workshop would help students write more and become better writers. What would the effect of oral storytelling be on students’ writing in first grade? Would students’ writing scores for content, organization, and style be higher if they engaged in oral storytelling prior to writing? Would the students’ attitudes about writing improve when engaging in oral storytelling prior to writing?

Before oral storytelling, we observed the students during writing mini-lesson as well as during their writing time. We found that many students talked a lot during their writing time. Some of the students seemed to be off task and were not getting enough writing done. Most students took more than two weeks to complete a book. Some students were struggling to select a writing topic. Many of the students were writing random thoughts on each page of their book.

After introducing oral storytelling, students were listening to each other and seemed to enjoy sharing stories. We noticed that when a student began telling a story, other students made connections and wanted to share a similar story. This helped students that were having a tough time thinking of something to write. We were very excited when we noticed students helping each other during writing time. One student asked another student, “What letters make the /ow/ sound? I am trying to write house.” Another student asked, “What did I say happened after the ball went over the fence?”

At the end of our study, we wanted to find out what the students thought about writer’s workshop and oral storytelling. What did they like? What did they want to spend more time doing? Was storytelling helping them or was there something else they needed from us? When asked what things helped them become better writers, students made comments like:

- “Telling stories helps me write.”
- “I like getting the story in your head before going back to write.”
- “I like getting to tell stories.”
- “I want to keep writing all day long.”
- “I want to do more storytelling.”
- “Writing is fun.”
- “I want to write more stories.”
- “I like doing the stories and writing it.”
- “I like writing about all kinds of stuff that I know about.”
- “Pictures. . . I like to draw the pictures.”

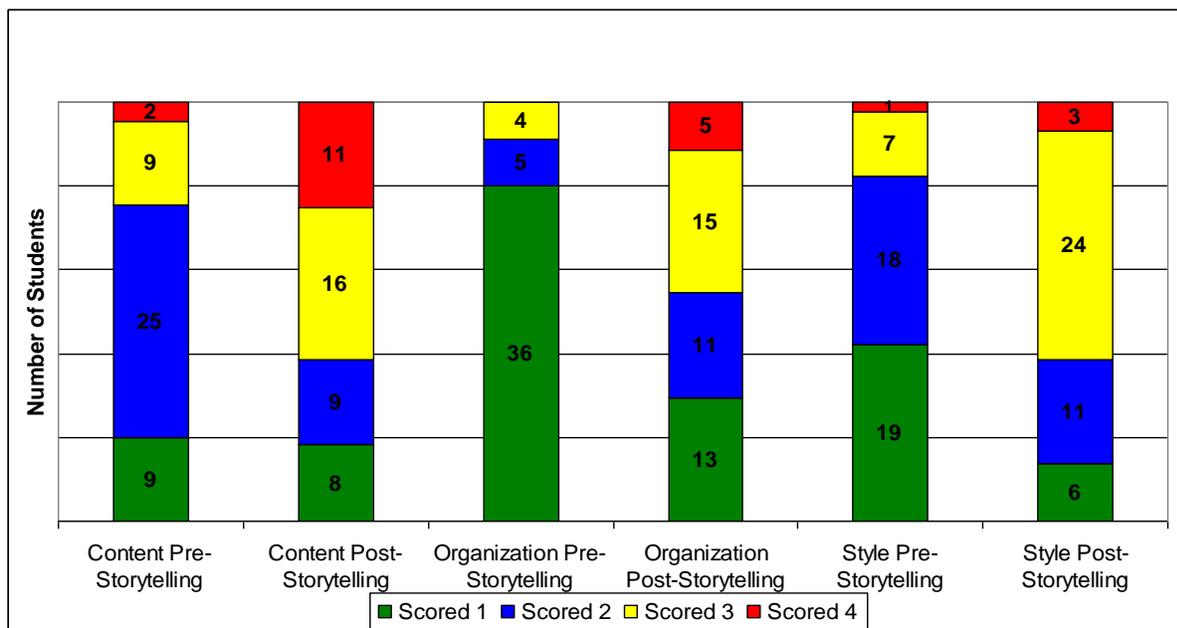
Table 1 shows the average rubric scores on the writing rubric, pre-storytelling and post-storytelling, for the students in our two classes. We found that oral storytelling had a positive impact on our students’ writing in the areas of Content, Organization, and Style. After students shared their stories verbally the written stories were longer and contained more details. We did a paired sample t-test and found there was a significant difference between the pre- storytelling and post-storytelling in three out of the four categories measured ($p < .001$). The categories that yielded significant differences were Content, Organization, and Style. Figure 1 provides a graphic display of how many students were in each rating category for Content, Organization, and Style. The biggest gains were in the areas of Organization and Style. The criteria used to evaluate Organization were having a beginning, middle and end to the story. The criteria for

Style were use of complete sentences, interesting and appropriate word choice, and hearing the writer's voice. In the Organization category pre-storytelling, 36 of the 45 students scored a one (the lowest score). That was a large percentage of students needing support. By the end of the study, only 13 students scored a one. Nineteen students scored a one in the Style category pre-storytelling compared to six students post-storytelling.

Table 1: Mean Scores

Rubric Category	pre-storytelling means	post-storytelling means
content	2.09	2.69
organization	1.29	2.29
style	1.78	2.56

Figure 1: Rubric Results



On the attitude survey, a three rating was positive, two neutral, and one negative. When doing a paired sample t-test on the data collected, there was not a significant difference between the pre-storytelling and the post-storytelling total ratings ($p = .643$). In retrospect, we believe that the attitude survey was an invalid measuring tool. Taking a closer look at the surveys, we surmise that many students may have colored the smiley faces to make pretty patterns rather than to record their true feelings. Therefore, the results may be invalid. This type of paper and pencil survey may not be the best way to ascertain first grade students' attitudes. We believe that the students did not truly understand the purpose of the survey and therefore did not take it seriously.

mplications and Conclusions

Initially, we conducted this study for a six week period starting with a Writer's Workshop without oral storytelling. After introducing oral storytelling and conducting oral storytelling sessions prior to writing for only two weeks, we noticed an improvement in students' attitudes about writing. We also found some growth in the students' writing scores. We felt that a two week period was not enough time to assess whether oral storytelling had caused the students to write better; therefore, we continued the study for an additional six weeks. The data shows that across three months there was improvement in the students' writing scores with oral storytelling. It should, however, be noted that there are other factors that could have contributed to this improvement. From the beginning of the school year to the end of the study, students matured, read and listened to many books, engaged in interactive writing lessons, and participated in writing mini-lessons. So, while we are convinced that oral storytelling is a powerful technique, it is unlikely to be the single variable that led to growth.

We also found that, after three months, the students' grew tired of oral storytelling. The additional six weeks seemed to be too long. If oral storytelling is used in the future, we believe that it should be used for shorter amounts of time and should be interspersed with other techniques. In addition, we need to find an alternative to a paper and pencil survey to measure attitude changes.

We will continue to use oral storytelling in our Writer's Workshops with some minor modifications. We have already shared our initial findings with colleagues in our buildings and plan to follow up with our final conclusions. Based on our experience, we strongly recommend oral storytelling as a vehicle to get primary youngsters to organize their thoughts before writing them down.



If you want to try oral storytelling:**Do**

- Introduce storytelling early in the year
- Be enthusiastic when you model oral storytelling
- Invite other people to come into share stories (parents, grandparents, other teachers, principal)
- Talk about authors and how they write about things they know and care about
- Conduct storytelling sessions for two to three weeks at a time
- Keep the writing survey simple and fill out in small groups
- Have a variety of writing paper and special totes with writer's tools: sharpened pencils, colored pencils, markers, crayons, paper clips, mini-staplers, date stamps, etc. just for writer's workshop
- Play quiet music during writing time
- Give them plenty of uninterrupted time to write at the same time each day
- Come up with an alternative writing survey

Don't

- Get overwhelmed; think about how children that are writing a story may forget about the conventions of print. They can always fix it up later.
- Conduct storytelling for longer than a few weeks at a time
- Cut storytelling or writing time short. They need lots of time.
- Forget to give praise
- Get discouraged. It gets better over time.



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