



 Learning that Lasts 

Teaching-Stories™ for Early
Childhood Education



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of Teaching-Stories by Idries Shah**

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Introduction

Educators and psychologists all recognize that the early years are critically important for our children. During these years we want to provide them with the basic skills they need to encourage a lifelong love of learning and the habits of mind that will get them off to a rich start.

We want to help young learners develop skills that they can use to become successful as they continue in life and in their school careers. In order to do this, we need to use tools that encourage higher-level comprehension, promote social and emotional development, encourage empathy and conflict resolution, and enhance critical thinking. Above all, we need to engage in best-practice strategies that ensure that this critical learning is taking place.

One such tool is the Teaching-Story. This booklet describes its unique qualities and discusses how current brain research views Teaching-Stories as beneficial. It explores higher-level thinking skills, such as analogical and contextual thinking, and describes how these are enhanced by the careful use of these stories. We look at

the value of open-ended questions. We see that social and emotional, as well as empathetic, benefits can be reaped when we use Teaching-Stories. And, finally, we examine strategies such as the use of meaningful repetition that will help us ensure our children's successful use of this material.

A list of Teaching-Stories, a description of them and other details can be found on page 8.



The Importance of Teaching-Stories

We construct our world through the stories we tell and hear

We all have stories we tell ourselves. They start from the moment we are born. From infancy through adolescence and on into adulthood, consciously or unconsciously, what we hear and see in the actions and behavior of those around us, in the media to which we are exposed, and in the books we read, all contribute to our internal stories and, consequently, to our views of ourselves and our world.

Our memories are almost all stories, and these stories profoundly affect who we are and who we can become. If we could, we would expose our children only to stories that nourish their capacities and gifts and support the fulfillment of each child's unique potential.

Teaching-Stories develop thinking skills and perception

The Teaching-Story is an art form that has existed all over the world for thousands of years. Highly valued in communities, storytellers told stories that not only entertained and provided an oral history, they also recounted stories especially designed for a specific purpose, that of developing human thinking skills and perception. Such stories were told again and again to young and old alike.

Nowadays, while this storytelling tradition is still common in Afghanistan, and in other parts of Central Asia and the Middle East, it is largely unknown in the West. People in the Middle East and Central Asia have long regarded certain traditional stories as being specifically designed to nurture not only the intellect, but also the social, emotional, intuitive and perceptive abilities in ourselves and our children. Now, many Western psychologists and educators agree with this analysis.



Brain Research

A scientific understanding of the Teaching-Story

In a recent lecture at the Library of Congress, psychologist Robert Ornstein, a pioneer in studying the brain's two hemispheres, said that researchers have found that reading Teaching-Stories activates the right side of the brain much more than does reading informational text. Ornstein, considered one of the world's foremost experts on the brain and who has taught at Stanford, Harvard and University of California at San Francisco, says, "The right side of the brain provides 'context,' the essential function of putting together the different components of experience. The left side provides the 'text,' or the pieces themselves. Familiarity with these stories can expand context: enabling us to understand more about our world and our place in it."¹

Ornstein sees these stories as key to our basic cognitive development, leading the child and then the adult to learn more about what happens in the world and when and how events come together. "It's as if we had the unassembled parts of a bicycle and knew, through analogy (the shapes perhaps), that there was a relationship between the handles and our hands, the pedals and our feet, and so on. We may even have an idea that these are a necessary

part of what is known as 'a bike' and of 'riding a bike.' But to actually assemble the bike correctly, then to be able to ride it, when and where to ride it, etc., that requires contextual thinking: seeing each disparate part as part of a whole. That 'whole,' of course, expands with experience and understanding. A comprehensive study of Teaching-Stories provides what is, for all intents and purposes, a limitless whole."

He points out that Teaching-Stories exist in all cultures, and that an analysis of the stories throughout the world shows that the same stories occur time and again in different cultures. "It is the 'Disneyfication' of such stories – the selection and retelling of only those elements within the original that have a strong emotional appeal – that has led to the temporary demise in Western culture of the Teaching-Story as a developmental instrument."

"Teaching-Stories have been part of all cultures from time immemorial," says Ornstein, "but only recently, thanks to the work of the Afghan author Idries Shah, who collected hundreds of these, have they been available for study by Western scholars and their psychological significance appreciated."

The Teaching-Story is an educational tool that can help our children develop analogical and contextual thinking skills and dialogic inquiry. These higher-level skills will assist them throughout their lives.

¹Robert Ornstein, *Teaching-Stories and The Brain*, Library of Congress lecture, 2002.



Teaching-Stories Expand Contextual Thinking

The unique qualities of the Teaching-Story

Teaching-Stories acknowledge a child's individuality and uniqueness; they encourage a sense of confidence, responsibility and purpose. They foster in children a belief in their ability to live positive and fulfilling lives and to recognize and welcome challenges and changes when they are indicated. In addition, they facilitate a growing understanding of life, love and learning.

These stories are different from other tales. On the surface, they often appear to be little more than fairy or folk tales, or sometimes just jokes. Their design, however, embodies – in the characters, plots and imagery – patterns and relationships that nurture an area of the mind not reachable in more direct ways. Thus, working with these stories increases our understanding and breadth of vision and our ability to think critically.

The structure of Teaching-Stories is different from the usual stories to which we are accustomed. While many stories are built on arousing fear, presenting an emotional resolution, or simply telling children what they ought to do or think, Teaching-Stories are more subtle. They suggest ways of looking at difficulties that can help solve problems calmly. They encourage, in all of us, the development of additional perspectives and the flexibility of thought essential to understanding and coping with our complex world. Often these stories contain improbable events that lead the reader's mind to new and unexplored insights. They allow us to develop more flexibility, appreciate more alternatives, and so make more informed choices. Through them we can develop a better understanding of human behavior and motivation.

A number of these stories seem to trap our sequential, logical mode of thought and, by “striking it a blow,” tip us into thinking in a more intuitive, contextual mode (e.g., *The Farmer's Wife*; see description on pg. 8). They change our automatic way of thinking, for a time at least, and encourage our brain to make new connections (e.g., the many tales from the “Mulla Nasrudin” corpus or *The Book of the Book* by Idries Shah, pub. Octagon Press).

Not only do these stories enrich contextual and intuitive thinking, they also enhance analogical thought. “The right hemisphere is best at recognizing the relationships between entities, which is at the core of analogy.”² Children can be encouraged to extrapolate from the events and characters in these stories to those in their own lives. When we encourage analogical thought in our children, we help them develop flexible, inventive minds that are able to meet the challenges of life in and out of school.



The Importance of Analogical Thinking

Young children think analogically

Holyoak and Thagard in their book *Mental Leaps*³ give an example of a child's ability to think analogically. Neil is a four-year-old who is pondering the deep issue of what a bird might use for a chair. He initially decides that the tree branch might be the bird's chair and his mother praises him for his answer,

² *Ibid.*, Ornstein.

³ Keith J. Holyoak, Paul Thagard, *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought*, MIT Press, 1996.

adding that the bird could sit on its nest as well, which is also its house. Several minutes later (and time is an important factor in this process), Neil has second thoughts and says that the tree is not the bird's chair, it is its backyard. Neil here makes a mental leap. He is now trying to understand the entire world of the unfamiliar in terms of his own familiar world. He is thinking analogically.

The child's everyday world is his only reference, a known world that he or she already understands in terms of familiar patterns. In this example, Neil knows people sit on chairs and houses open onto backyards. The bird's world is a relatively unfamiliar one that Neil is trying to understand through his own familiar one.

Holyoak and Thagard conclude that young children without any formal training have a natural capacity to reason by analogy. We need to help them expand upon this natural ability.

It is now known that children are able to make simple analogies as early as the age of two, something that we observe when a child plays with her doll as if she were the mother and the doll her baby.

This is analogical thought, using the structure of the known to identify with and act "as if," in this case, the child were a mother. This is a new experience for the child, one that enables her to understand, integrate and empathize with her mother, mothers and caregivers in general, mothers of any nationality or even species, and so on – the "context" of such situations, in Ornstein's language.

Learning requires the brain to construct meaning, i.e., to make connections between the new information and an experience that is already known to the learner. The brain naturally constructs meaning when it perceives relationships,⁴ and those relevant or meaningful connections motivate the brain to be engaged and focused.

Constructing meaning is the major requisite to learning and the core of intellectual processing.⁵ When children make analogies, they are constructing meaning by relating something that is both emotionally and intellectually familiar to them with the new information. This is a very powerful way to learn.



Teaching-Stories provide rich source material for analogical thinking

Analogical thought provides a powerful mechanism for understanding ourselves and our world, our origins and our destiny. Analogy is used in building scientific theory and in writing poetry. It is used in myths and legends. Coming to an analogical insight – an "Ah-Ha!" moment – is a fulfilling experience; it feels good no matter how young or old we are!

It is this innate ability that we encourage and build on when we use the Teaching-Story. One can say, in Holyoak and Thagard's terms, that Teaching-Stories, and there are many hundreds of them published for people of all ages, provide the richest "source analogs" available to us for the development of our own and our children's potential. As you are using these tales with your children, you too may come to new, more sophisticated insights.

By allowing children to juxtapose situations, characters and events that occur in Teaching-Stories with those that occur in

⁴Renate N. Caine, Geoffrey Caine, *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*, Rev. Ed. Dale Seymour Pubs., 1994.

⁵Yvette Jackson, PhD, National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, "Reversing Underachievement in Urban Students: Pedagogy of Confidence" in Costa, A., *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*, ASCD, 2001.

their own lives, we enhance their ability to understand, through analogy, aspects of their lives that may otherwise perplex or confuse them. When children start to think in this way with these stories, they begin to experience a social and emotional growth. This will continue: as their experiences increase, they will concurrently gain additional analogical insights from each tale.



Teaching-Stories are Instrumental: they provoke thought, action and understanding

As Ornstein says, the Teaching-Stories are highly contextual. That is, if we keep a place for them in our minds, we will see that they contain dimensions of meaning that each of us can use when situations that are structurally similar arise in our everyday experiences. Having this rich contextual source available at a time when it is relevant encourages greater understanding, real insights, and flexible thought, all of which lead to more options and so the possibility of more productive action.



Teaching-Stories seem superficially simple, but are not

Because these stories seem simple, there's a danger that we will look for a single moral or message; that we will use a story for psychoanalysis or react with a wisecrack response, or think this is "just another tale for children" and then dismiss it. We should avoid this because it completely destroys the ability of the story to function. In order to stay with a story, we must resist the

temptation to reduce it and not to behave as, for example, the old woman does in *The Old Woman and the Eagle* (see page 8 for a description of this story).

Teaching-Stories are carefully designed to show effective ways of defining and responding to common life experiences. A story is an especially good vehicle for this kind of communication because it imbeds into our consciousness in ways that direct instruction cannot. Adults, who have more experience upon which to draw, may see additional depths in these stories. In fact, many parents and teachers find that these stories are useful for life: yielding richer meanings and insights as we mature and reflect on them and see them from our own daily experiences.

In order to extract the most benefit from these stories, we must work with them over time and on multiple occasions. These stories can be used in much the same way that we employ mnemonic devices, such as "Thirty days hath September," which helps us remember the number of days in the months, or when we commit geometric formulae to memory in order to solve problems.

We want our children to learn these stories "by heart": to make each one their own. Only then can they deepen and expand their understanding of the stories and use them. As we saw with Neil and the bird's world, time deepens understanding. We can use the strategy of repetition to help with both these aspects.

Something for Everyone

In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell explains that *Sesame Street* is often criticized for enticing adults to watch the show with their children by adding elements that will keep the adults' interest.⁶ They add double entendres and adult jokes that children

⁶Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, Little Brown, 2002.

don't get and, while they may help keep adults sitting there, these elements distract from children's focused attention, interrupt their engagement, and take up valuable time.

On the other hand, says Gladwell, *Blues Clues* caters totally to kids by repeating the identical episode five times in a week. This repetitive pattern, so necessary for children, bores the adults so that they don't want to sit and watch with their children. And we know it's beneficial for parents to engage in their children's learning.

What's unique about Teaching-Stories is that they don't sacrifice either audience. The story remains intact. What one gets out of each story depends on one's experience and development as well as on repeated exposure to the tale. So, children listen to the story again and again and get more and more out of it. As they become familiar with the plot and characters, they are able to focus and understand the more subtle elements. Adults, too, gain additional insights as they read each story over and over again.

These stories are verbally beautiful. They have entertained people from all walks of life for centuries, and they have layers of meaning to interest and benefit us all.



Repetition is essential for children, it allows them to develop understanding

In order to profit from the rich complexity of these stories, we and our children need to make them our own.

Children will enrich their understanding by simply hearing these stories many times because repetition gives young learners the

opportunity to extract more and more from them. In addition, we as their teachers can utilize well-designed activities that alter the focus of every reading in order to enhance each child's experience of the story.

Gladwell in *The Tipping Point* examines the notion of repetition. "For younger kids repetition is really valuable. They demand it. When they see a show over and over again, they not only are understanding it better, which is a form of power, but just by predicting what is going to happen, I think they feel a sense of affirmation and self-worth."⁷

Under ordinary circumstances, an adult considers constant repetition boring, because it requires reliving the same experience again and again. But as we repeatedly read Teaching-Stories over months and even years, additional insights and understandings can be gleaned.

In any event, Gladwell's findings show that for young children "repetition isn't boring. Each time they experience something, they are experiencing it in a completely different way. In order for repetition to be useful to children, each occurrence must provide another level of understanding and meaning." As we and our children read and learn Teaching-Stories, we can all experience new levels of understanding and meaning.

One of the ways we can support repetition and encourage levels of understanding and meaning is to ask open-ended questions that encourage children to look more and more intensely at the story.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Gladwell.



Open-ended questions encourage analogical thought

Although we need to be sure that each child knows and understands the facts of a story accurately in order for it to work analogically, we should not confine ourselves to factual questions.

We need to ask questions that engage the child in making her/his own assessments of the situation and that encourage analogical thought. We might ask, after reading *The Lion Who Saw Himself in the Water*, “Have you ever seen your reflection?” “Did it ever surprise you as it did the lion?” “Do you ever get afraid when you see someone else afraid?” “Why do you think that is?” With this type of question there is no incorrect answer as long as the child can defend his/her thinking. This type of dialogue with children is critical because it helps them make inferences and encourages their comprehension. With Teaching-Stories, in particular, open-ended questions encourage analogical thought and leave the door open for deeper and deeper levels of understanding.

Encourage dialogic enquiry in classrooms

Small-group discussion, say of four or five children of varying abilities and temperaments, can generate a conversation, guided gently by your input of open-ended questions. These conversations provide a forum for leaps in understanding, communication, and co-operation. Children will have their own questions and theories that they can negotiate with others. Small groups encourage us all to listen to each other and legitimize each other’s point of view.



Conclusion

Educators will be able to accelerate learning by using Teaching-Stories in the early childhood classroom. Children will improve their contextual and analogical thinking by working with these stories and engaging in open-ended discussions about them. Through these stories they will discover alternative ways of seeing and coping with their complex world.

Through repeated experiences with these highly nutritious materials, children gain a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem.

By helping our children make each Teaching-Story their own, we will help them better understand human behavior and motivation, and so promote their social and emotional development. We will provide them with tools that will help them solve problems, improve their prediction, intuitive and perceptive skills, and lead happy, productive and meaningful lives.

The use of Teaching-Stories in our classrooms provides endless possibilities for our early childhood learners. This is learning that lasts.



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What People are Saying

"[Idries Shah's] stories...transcend any culture...deal with a range of issues, from fear and self-confidence to goals and dreams."

– **The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art**

"These Teaching-Stories can be experienced on many levels. A child may simply enjoy hearing them, an adult may analyze them in a more sophisticated way. Both may eventually benefit from the lessons within." – **Lynn Neary "All Things Considered," NPR News, Washington**

"...a series of children books that have captivated the hearts and minds of people from all walks of life. ...Through repeated reading, these stories provoke fresh insight and more flexible thought in children. Beautifully illustrated." – **NEA Today, The Magazine of the National Education Association**

"...unique quality as well as rich art will invite discussions of difference in the characters and meanings of tales across cultures...a welcome addition to traditional literature collections." – **School Library Journal**

"There is an innate potential in these books for supporting skills such as prediction, critical thinking, and social/emotional development skills of demonstrating empathy and conflict resolution." – **Laurie Noe, Ed.D., Director of Education, Literacy Caravan, Weston Woods Institute**



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