



Introduction

Everyone loves a good story - especially the young people we teach. In fact, being able to tell a story in an interesting and compelling way is an important teaching skill. This is because a good story is not only entertaining but is capable of holding student attention while they learn important concepts, attitudes and skills.




In her book, *Earthtales: Storytelling in Times of Change*, Alida Gersie (1992) notes that storytelling relates to current concerns about our future because most stories focus on the Earth, how it was created, and the problems that can arise when we forget the importance of living in harmony with it and each other.

“ Storytelling is currently experiencing a considerable revival of interest. This has led many educators to think about ways in which storytelling can be used to explore important shared themes and visions. The current concern about environmental issues is connected with this revival, since folktales about the relationship between the Earth and its human inhabitants have been at the heart of storytelling since earliest times. Not only do such stories offer a source of inspiration, they also contain a potential for understanding the many ways in which we value and devalue our beautiful green and blue planet. Stories provide us with practical insight into approaches to our most persistent environmental difficulties. ”

Source: Adapted from Gersie, A. (1992) *Earthtales: Storytelling in Times of Change*, Green Print, London, p. 1.

This module focuses on storytelling as a key teaching strategy for achieving the objectives of education for sustainable futures.

Objectives

-  To develop an appreciation of stories as educational resources, especially as sources of teaching themes that support education for a sustainable futures;
-  To develop skills in locating and telling stories as part of a teaching programme; and
-  To develop strategies for integrating storytelling approaches into teaching units to achieve the objectives of education for a sustainable future.

Activities

1. Telling a story
2. The value of stories
3. Finding and telling good stories
4. Using indigenous stories
5. Using success stories
6. Reflection

References

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Credits

This module was written for UNESCO by John Fien, Bernard Cox and Margaret Calder using ideas, activities and material suggested by Annette Gough, Premila Kumar and John Fien in *Learning for a Sustainable Environment* (UNESCO - ACEID).



Begin by opening your [learning journal](#) for this activity.



Reading a Story

Read this story about 'The Ingenious Inuit'.

“ Traditionally, the Inuit lived in the Arctic areas of northern Canada where there are brief mild summers and very long blizzardy winters. You might think that the summers are pleasant but the millions of biting insects, mosquitoes and gnats make life uncomfortable for people and animals alike. Even the caribou keep on the move to try to evade biting mosquitoes. Despite the frigid cold of winter, it is in some ways the more pleasant season, because the insects are gone. But in the deep of winter, the hours of daylight or twilight are few and wind howls and whips up the snow sometimes creating dreaded whiteouts. Sky and land are both white - you cannot see where the land ends and the sky begins - and travelers can easily lose their way. How did the traditional Inuit manage to subsist in what we would regard as a very difficult environment?







The answer, perhaps, is their ingenuity - their ability to find clever solutions to everyday problems of finding food and making shelter. A good example of their ingenuity is the traditional way of hunting wolves - an important source of fur and food for the Inuit. On foot, the Inuit is no match for the speedy wolf. So they use their ingenuity to hunt wolves.

A piece of bendy rib bone from a caribou is sharpened at both ends and carefully folded into a lump of seal meat so that the bone is in a round U-shape. Once in the wolves' territory, the Inuit throws the piece of meat on to the snow where the wolves will find it. The hungry wolf sees fresh meat, swallows it in one great gulp and lopes away. The Inuit watches patiently, and tracks the wolf. Slowly the meat is digested in the wolf's stomach, exposing the bone which opens out and begins to cut into the wolf's stomach. The ingenious Inuit follows patiently. The wolf begins to falter, being scarred internally by the sharp bone; the Inuit closes in on his prey. Time passes. The wolf howls painfully and is unable to run any longer. The Inuit closes in. His ingenuity has given him wolf meat for meals and wolf fur for clothing. ”



Q1: What features of the story of 'The Ingenious Inuit' make it interesting?

Perhaps, some of these common features of interesting stories were present:

-  A clear story throughout, with introduction, development and swift conclusion
-  Action
-  Vivid description
-  Repetition of main themes for emphasis
-  An appeal to feelings and emotions
-  Characters people can identify with and villains they can dislike.



Listening to a Story

You have just read the story of 'The Ingenious Inuit' from your screen. Now [listen](#) to it as told by an experienced storyteller. Close your eyes to help the story come alive in your imagination.

Q2: What makes listening to a story generally more interesting than reading one?





Begin by opening your [learning journal](#) for this activity.

Reflect on the role of stories in your life and learning as you read this quotation:

“ Stories have the power to reach within us, to command emotion, to compel involvement, and to transport us into timelessness. Stories are a way of thinking, a primary organiser of information and ideas, the soul of a culture, and the consciousness of a people. Stories are a way in which we can know, remember and understand. ”

Source: Livo, N. and Rietz, S. (1986) *Storytelling: Process and Practice*, Libraries Unlimited, Colorado, p. 2.

There are many reasons why stories may be important in our cultures and to each of us personally.

- Stories safeguard and codify information as well as beliefs, and rules for living.
- Stories remind us of other times and different places and lift us beyond our limiting pre-occupation with the 'here and now'. Thereby, they facilitate the emergence of a fresh perspective on our actual situation.
- Stories provide us with a known completion, a unity of form. Each story has a beginning, a middle and an end. A specific conflict and patterns of conflict resolution are usually embedded within this structure. These can stimulate the development of possible solutions to our own predicaments.
- Stories evoke powerful emotional responses. These emotions help us to clarify the way we feel and can fuel the desire for change.
- Stories nearly always generate communication. Not only does listening to story create a warm bond between us, once the story is finished we often automatically turn to each other to talk and to share our responses. Likewise, a good story invariably evokes the longing to retell it to others.
- Stories can help us work through traumatic and stressful experiences so we might regain feelings of mastery and develop new insights.
- Stories often reflect the viewpoints of indigenous people and so can bring their lessons on sustainability to others.



Q3: Identify reasons why stories have been important in your life. Give an example for each reason.





Begin by opening your [learning journal](#) for this activity.

Finding Stories

Stories can be found in many different places and take many different forms. For example, stories can be found in books, novels, poetry and songs. Stories are also told through dance, puppetry, theatre, television and movies.

The purpose of this activity is to help recognise some of the many sources of good stories and to develop a locally relevant story collection.



Teachers use stories a lot with their classes. It is a good idea to develop a card file (or data base) of these stories. [Activity 4](#) and [Activity 5](#) provide examples to help start your collection

Q4: Begin now by making a list of stories you have used (or know) that are suited to lessons about sustainable futures.

The Art of Telling a Good Story

Storytelling is an 'art' - and sometimes we can feel shy about telling stories in public. However, storytelling is an art that can be developed through practice.

To become confident, exciting storytellers, we not only need to choose 'good stories' we also need to practice the art of telling stories to develop the skill.

Here is a set of six principles to practice telling stories effectively. Use the principles selectively, modifying them to suit your personality and teaching situation.



Selection

Select a story which students will enjoy and want to hear. Like everyone, students enjoy hearing stories that have humour, surprise, suspense, interesting characters and clean sharp dialogue. However, stories must also be relevant to the task at hand as students can easily tell when a story is a time-filler, rather than a key part of a lesson.



Time out

In order to learn a story you need time out from other distractions. Set aside some time (maybe 30 minutes) to read your story several times and to concentrate on key events in the story line, characters and their personalities, and any different 'voices' you will use.



Give voice to the story

After reading your story silently several times, try reading it out loud. You may wish to highlight parts which need emphasis, refrains, openings and closings. Remember storytelling does not mean learning a story word-for-word. Consider those parts which you want to learn verbatim and the parts which feel comfortable telling in your own words. Saying your story out loud (without the book) will give you an idea of what sounds good to the ear and what does not.



Story structure

Develop notes on the structure of the story. It is important that you only record key words, phrases or sentences; otherwise, you will be tempted to rewrite the whole story.



Tell it 'Without the book'

Try to memorise the opening and the closing of a story. Repeated dialogue is also important to learn by heart. When you feel reasonably comfortable with the story, try telling it out loud without looking at the book. Find the parts which cause you problems. Listen to how your characters speak, pay attention to parts you emphasise, and so on. At this point, it is helpful to record your story on a cassette tape. This is a good way of hearing the parts which are too soft, too loud, mumbled and so on. If you learn by listening, then replay the tape (when you are happy with it) at every opportunity.



Tell it to an audience

When you feel confident that you know your story find someone to tell it to. Ask for feedback. What parts did you do well? What parts can be improved? Were there any parts you forgot? Are any words or phrases difficult to hear? Then practice it a few more times as the more you practice, the better you will become.

Source: Adapted from Mallan, K. (1996) *Storytelling Sourcebook*, Project SARA, Brisbane, pp. 15-16.



Begin by opening your [learning journal](#) for this activity.

Indigenous stories are extremely valuable in education for a sustainable future because they have a different message to the stories commonly told on television and in movies and advertising.

The emphasis on sustainable living in indigenous stories is illustrated in the following extract from a speech by the native North American, Chief Seattle (c. 1786-1866):

“ We are part of the Earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices of the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and man - all belong to the same family. What is man without the beast? If the beasts are gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beast soon happens to man. All things are connected.











This we know. The Earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the Earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of the Earth. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. ”



Note: The authenticity of this wording of Chief Seattle's speech is a subject of much recent research. An [original version](#) of the speech is available on the Internet.

Indigenous stories are very useful for teaching many different topics and school subjects. You could begin your collection of stories for teaching about sustainable futures with indigenous stories.

The Internet is a good source to begin your search for these stories. Begin with these sites:



-  [African Creation Stories](#)
-  [Ainu \(Japan\) - Creation Story](#)
-  [Australia - Stories of the Dreaming](#)
-  [Central America - Mayan Stories](#)
-  [First People's Mythology and Astronomy - Canada](#)
-  [India - Hindu Stories](#)
-  [Inuit Mythology](#)
-  [Legends from around the World](#)
-  [World Mythology](#)
-  [Samoa - Creation Stories](#)

Suggestions for integrating indigenous stories (and other aspects of indigenous knowledge) into the school curriculum are provided in [Module 11](#).

Module 11 emphasises that caution is needed when using indigenous knowledge within the curriculum because important issues of culture, identity and intellectual property are at stake.

Read about some of the important [issues](#) associated with incorporating indigenous stories into the curriculum.

Q5: In your learning journal, list:

-  Sources of indigenous stories from your country or region that you could use in teaching towards a sustainable future; and
-  How you would ascertain the cultural norms that need to be considered.





Begin by opening your [learning journal](#) for this activity.

Indigenous or traditional societies are not the only ones that care for the Earth. Many contemporary groups are also actively working to ensure a sustainable future. These include international groups such as Amnesty International and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) as well as many local conservation, development, youth and women's groups.

Success stories from groups like these can provide hope and inspiration as well as demonstrate practical solutions to today's problems.



This activity is based on a story set in Sri Lanka. It concerns the people of a mountain forest village and the way their monk encouraged them to use locally relevant principles of sustainable living to organise village life.

Listen to the [The Monk's Story](#).









Q6: What storytelling techniques help make 'The Monk's Story' a useful one for educational purposes?

Q7: What educational objectives could be achieved by telling 'The Monk's Story' to your students?

See some [sample objectives](#).

Educationally, stories are important for the messages that can be learned from them. This task illustrates one way in which students could explore the messages in 'The Monk's Story'. It is based upon the six principles of sustainable living that the monk believed were important:

- 
Harmony with nature
 Doing things in a more natural way. Learning from the underlying co-operation of living and non-living things. Recycling our resources. Living and working with our environment in a sustainable way.
- 
Quality of life
 Living selfishly just for what we can get leads to misery and conflict with other people and the environment. Living selflessly to give, help and serve, leads to happiness, fulfillment and harmony with everyone and everything around us.
- 
Self reliance
 Not being dependent on other people, especially experts. Taking our own decisions, being responsible for ourselves. Participating, and doing what we feel to be the right thing.
- 
Variety and diversity
 Welcoming differences in ideas, opinions, people, etc. Respecting and valuing other people and their ideas, even though they may be different from us and our ideas. Not wishing to make things the same or uniform.
- 
Small is beautiful
 Wherever possible, organising things on a small scale gives control to ordinary people. Small groups can often get things done quickly. Large organisations are usually difficult to change, even when people's needs change.
- 
Co-operation and peace
 All around the world we see competition and aggression. People feel that they must win at something to feel good. But people can share their skills and resources. By working together co-operatively with each other and our environment, we can lead a more peaceful and satisfying life.



Identify the actions taken by the people in the Sri Lankan village to put these six principles into practice.





Source: Adapted from Beddes, R. and Johnson C. (eds) (1988) *Only One Earth: A Multimedia Education Pack*, WWF-UK, Godalming, Surrey.



Q8: Are any of these six principles relevant to sustainable living in your society? Make a list of one thing you, your school or community could do to follow any of the six principles in 'The Monk's Story'.



Objectives for Using 'The Monk's Story' in a Teaching Unit

-  To identify social and ecological principles for living sustainably;
-  To empathise with the lives and conditions of people in other parts of the world;
-  To realise that many people are being successful in solving environmental problems; and
-  To reflect on the successful experiences of other groups to evaluate what relevance they have for us.



Begin by opening your [learning journal](#) for this activity.



Completing the module: Look back through the activities and tasks to check that you have done them all and to change any that you think you can improve now that you have come to the end of the module.



Q9: Identify three key ideas or skills you have learnt in this module.

Q10: Identify the strengths you have as a storyteller.

Q11: What skills for storytelling and using stories in teaching would you like to develop further?

Q12: Select one story you know and develop a plan for using it with a class.

