

Building Storytelling Skills Using Wordless Books by Mary Hamilton

Storytelling is not a memorization and recitation activity. Such an approach confuses it with dramatic recitation. Storytelling is a dramatic communication art. When retelling a folktale, for example, a teller needs to be able to retell the story using his or her own words, not memorizing and reciting the words found in a single print version of the tale. Many beginning storytellers do not trust that they have the ability to retell a tale in their own words, but when challenged to tell the story in the wordless book, they discover they are perfectly capable of coming up with words that tell the story.

In introducing this exercise, I am careful to model the difference between identifying what is in the pictures and telling a story. For example, "There's a boy and there's a frog" sounds like a list or a mere identification of images. "One day a boy and a frog were walking together" sounds like a story. Students I've worked with have readily grasped the difference when they hear it and are ready to retell the story from the book they examine.

The exercise:

1. I model the difference between a list/image identification and a story using a few pages of a wordless book.
2. Partners (or trios, but not larger or sharing the book will be a problem) look at a wordless book together without telling the story aloud. So, they learn what happens before putting words to the happenings. This is akin to using a story board as part of the learning process when working on a retelling of a folktale.
3. Then I ask them to go through the book again, taking turns telling the story, changing tellers with each page turn.
4. The exercise closes with the partnerships/trios sharing their retelling of the story to a larger group (whole class or a couple of other partnerships/trios). During this retelling they are showing the pictures to their audience while they are telling the story in words.

Note: This exercise can also be a solo endeavor, but I've observed those who are hesitant to talk do so more comfortably when working with a partner/trio.

Criteria for wordless book selection:

- Length – short (as compared with wordless graphic novels)
- Plot — present (as opposed to wordless books that are concept books with no plot)
- Plot line must be strong, not lending themselves to list — “they went. . . , and then they went. . .” — retellings.
- Ease of understanding — some books are more demanding than others, (for example, wordless books by Barbara Lehman require much more “figuring out” than wordless books by Mercer Mayer) but I do avoid wordless books that would take days of studying to understand because this activity is typically conducted within a single class period.
- More books than are necessary for any given group. (Sometimes a book is just not a good match for a particular partnership/trio, so I like to have alternatives readily available.)

Brief bio: Mary Hamilton has earned her living telling stories and pondering how the art of storytelling works since 1983. www.maryhamilton.info

Wordless Books: A Bibliography by Mary Hamilton

This bibliography leans heavily on the holdings of my local public library. When searching your own library's catalog, "wordless books" and "stories without words" may prove useful search terms.

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