

Storytelling as a Teaching Technique within the “Theatrical Education” Course: External and Internal Elements

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ABSTRACT: This article attempts an analysis of storytelling-reading techniques, as well as a presentation of basic rules to train storyteller-readers in such techniques. This effort is based on storytelling lessons in Education Departments in Greece, and more specifically in the Department of Early Childhood Education of the University of Western Macedonia. We analyse everything storytellers need to know to present a good overall “picture” to their audience. By this we mean, basically, dramatic concepts, such as the structure of fairy tales, the characters and plot. We also address issues of intelligence development, both on the side of the storytellers and of the children. We study the fact that storytelling by students in Education Departments in front of their classmates can be the first «step» in strengthening their expressive and teaching abilities. This happens in a rotating and alternating process, where everyone has the role of reader or narrator, in courses where feedback and two-way pedagogy play a dominant role.

KEYWORDS: Fairy tales, Theatre, Narrative, Dramaturgy, Education, Reading, Observation Method

Introduction

In this article we study the general rules for fairy tale reading and storytelling. We analyse the procedures a future storyteller needs to follow to become attractive to their audience. Fairy tales can acquire a pedagogical and theatrical dimension thanks to the special knowledge or skills of the narrators. When they do not know the fairy tale they want to tell very well, they resort to reading. Reading a fairy tale is different from narrating it as those who read it have a text in their hands and for the most part, whatever they express they read it from that text. Children accept this solution, realising, perhaps, that adults who attempt this have difficulties in memorising. They want to hear a fairy tale and they do not refuse the solution of reading from a book, especially when it contains images or photographs that help a lot in better understanding or enjoying the fairy tale. Consequently, this way of reading fairy tales to children - where the reader is next to the children and she can show them the pictures accompanying the text read, offers one advantage: the assistance through pictures.

Methodology

To write this paper, the authors used the method of Observation of storytellers for many years (live, in cultural venues or on the tv), while the questions and interventions of their students during their courses, especially that of Theatrical Education, in the period 2014-21, have also been valuable material. Their observations were recorded in special forms and were subsequently sorted-processed in the first half of 2021. Questions in the period 2014-2019 were made by Mr. Gargalianos, orally in the lecture hall and were addressed to the listeners-students, while in the period 2020-2021 they were made electronically, i.e. via the internet, at the time of the narration or reading. The second way was also used by students for providing directly their answers, which

were recorded in special electronic forms, for later analysis by the professor. Mainly qualitative features of the narrative were studied, namely the theatricality/performativity, the voice tone, the use of facial expressions, hand movements, the relative movement in space.

Furthermore, books on theatrical roleplaying concepts were studied, while the authors placed special emphasis on recording plenty of external information, such as the surrounding area, the number of viewers-listeners, the duration of the reading or narration, etc.

Narration concepts

“Narration” as a word contains many sub-cases, ranging from very simple to very complex: a) narration of an event (e.g. X tells to Y what happened a few moments ago) b) narration of an important incident by a witness (e.g. testimony in a trial) c) narration in theatre and cinema, where an actor narrates to the public things that cannot be staged d) storytelling (Gargalianos 2020, 76). In these cases, there are significant deviations in the narrator's need for theatricality, as presented in the following table, as regards the Methodology of this article.

Table 1. Inherent features of a narrator in relation to the special conditions of the narration

	Theatricality/ performativity	Voice tone	Facial expressions	Hand movement	Movement in space
Narration of a simple event	2	2	3	3	4
Narration of an important incident by a witness	2	4	3	4	5
Narration in theatre and cinema	3	4	4	5	3
Storytelling	2	3	4	1	1

Score: 1 minimum - 5 maximum

Source: Theatrical Education Observation Sheets, 2014-21, Department of Early Childhood Education - University of Western Macedonia

Narration is a relative concept to that of “description”, such as in the case of sports events, public gatherings etc., with the difference being that said description, as a rule, takes place at the time of the event, while narration can be made at another time and may be based on a written text (Legrand 2004, 21).

Narration can be reading and memorisation, depending on if the narrator reads a text or has learnt it off by heart. In the second case, the narrator is allowed to move and transfer their body in space and can therefore give a very advanced perspective in what they narrate (Legrand 2004, 22) Then, we examine the question of whether a narrator should know the text they are about to narrate off by heart. If they cannot trust their memory, it is better that they read it. Reading (simple or complex) has a different impact on listeners, compared to a narration, because it involves its own techniques which, however, are much less demanding than those of memorisation narrative.

Dramaturgical analysis

To tell a story one should definitely first work thoroughly on what is called “dramaturgical analysis of a fairy tale”, in accordance with the respective rules of theatrical play analysis (Landier & Barret 1999, 65). Namely, they should wonder: what are the parts of the story (structure), what is the start and what is the end, what are the conflicts therein, why do the heroes conflict, when

and how many times is there a climax in action, are there any emotions among the heroes, what type and how intense are these emotions, etc.

A fairy tale should feature dialogues, action and “conflicts”. When these are absent, the narrator must discover and express them, first in writing and then in front of an audience. At the same time, any descriptions and tedious monologues that undermine the action and do not favour the development of the myth should be removed. Some fairy tales are made to be narrated and some are not, because they are not all written for narration. In another aspect, a significant number of fairy tales are complex or/and others lack “depth” (proper meaning or moral) and are therefore not worth the trouble (Tsingou 2021).

In general, a fairy tale can help children escape the mundane and lead them to another reality. It is advisable that narrators clarify this before any narration or reading, namely that they tell young children that all they are about to listen are imaginary and do not correspond to any given fact of their current or future life (Quentin 2004, 98).

First questions on technical issues

In Greek Education Departments, especially those of Early Childhood Education, a “tool” for professors teaching basic principles of theatre - not in a literary, but in a drama approach- is the teaching of the above techniques, with the aim of making students good storytellers or fairy tale readers in their future workplaces (Gargalianos 2020, 73). This practical application is a necessary, as well as important, process in a modern School, especially Kindergarten and, to a lesser extent, Primary School.

The external technical issues that arise as soon as reading-narrating starts, are the following:

- a. How often does the reader refer to or depend on the book.
- b. The same question about pictures of the same book.
- c. What is the distance between the children and the reader, i.e. are the pictures visible to children.
- d. The duration of the narration/reading of each fairy tale. Here, we seek the ideal time of reading-narration, based on the reactions of the listeners-students or/and children, as well as their statements regarding on whether they were tired by a reading (Gargalianos, *Observation Sheets*, 2021).

In this sense, everything analysed in this article is based on this two-way process and is presented, in summary, in the following table. In all qualitative characteristics, the predominant answer is “Moderate” and this is an indication that students are not at a high level during their studies.

Table 2. External technical issues in narration

	None/ Non-existent	Low/small	Moderate	High/ long	Very high/ long
a. Reader's level of dependence on the book (text)	No	No	No	No	Yes
b. Reader's level of dependence on the pictures	No	No	No	Yes	No
c. Reader's distance from the children	No	Yes	No	No	No
d. Duration of reading	No	No	Yes	No	No

Source: Gargalianos (2021), *Theatrical Education Observation Sheets, 2014-21*, Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Western Macedonia

Human relationships

We ought to analyse the possible human relationships between narrator/reader and viewer/listener. These are the ones that develop between the latter and the former. They concern the storyteller's friendliness, his willingness to better explain difficult concepts when asked, to basically be a person with good intentions towards his viewer-listeners. Questions arise about possible interruptions, doubts or questions by children (Tsingou 2021). When posed throughout the narrative, the reader/storyteller must devote a short amount of time to each, in order not to lose touch with all participants.

This also raises the issue of the homogeneity of children in terms of age and level of perception: if there are big differences, then, surely, some children will be able to understand a given fairy tale, while others won't (Sotiropoulou-Zorbala 2020, 131). Therefore, we may wonder if the reader/storyteller is able to understand these differences and provide (or not) as many explanations as necessary. At this point, one solution is to tell the fairy tale again in a more analytical way to younger children. This also implies the desire of all participants (reader-children) to be divided into small sub-groups, depending on the degree of perception on the part of the listeners, or of the older children to accept to listen to the fairy tale again.

Preparation Elements

Storytellers must know a multitude of fairy tales and constantly work on them. They find the material in libraries and bookstores, and now online. Due to the abundance of existing fairy tales, storytellers have to make a serious and careful selection. It is not enough to choose only on the basis of the season (e.g. Christmas Fairy Tales in December), but also on the basis of their expected audience each time. Storytellers must also be ready for unplanned invitations for storytelling from young children or heads of educational institutions, so they must show great readiness, both physical and mental (Pavis 2006, 65-66).

Storytellers can also compose their own fairy tales. When they tell their own stories, they tend to tell them better. However, they must be mindful of what they write. It would be a good idea to first talk with child psychologists and receive some advice in order to avoid harming the children. Words and concepts related to violence, death, hatred, etc., should be avoided. As far as preparation is concerned, it is advisable for storytellers to rehearse in front of the mirror and/or to record themselves in order to listen/watch themselves, with the aim of gradually improving.

Finally, observing other colleagues improves any new or seasoned narrator, but also gives a sense of renewal and constant improvement, thanks to what everyone achieves in the "space", through the "other", provided that these observations are mutual (Quentin 2004, 83).

Five key elements and dimensions

There are five key components of storytelling: Time, Space, Modes, Roles and Theme (Landier & Barrett 1999, 67, 223).

Time is double-dimensional. It is divided into: a. storytelling time (at which point in time the myth takes place) b. storytelling duration. Of course, often the time of the fairy tale is indeterminate (once upon a time...).

Space in storytelling has a threefold quality: a. the fairy tale space, b. where we tell it (in which room) and c. the space of the surrounding area (village, city, square, etc.)

Modes are the style in which heroes move or speak, e.g. fast, slow, scared, happy etc. It's also the way storytellers narrate, so here we have two dimensions: Fairy tale character mode, narrative mode.

Roles are the main characters in the fairy tale. Those who do not speak are not primary roles, but secondary or even tertiary roles, so of little importance. In a narrative, secondary roles are usually not even mentioned. Roles are considered to be any heroes speak and specifically the protagonists. That is, those who do not speak are not considered roles in storytelling, even if the storyteller mentions them (Gargalianos 2021, 77).

The theme is what concerns us as a hypothesis, but can be characterised by a word e.g. «Love», «Faith», «Passion», «Hate» etc. At the same time, the theme can be a long phrase such as «The Prince is looking for a beautiful girl, but he does not find her, so he is forced to...» (Pavis 2006, 370). These five elements of the narrative and their dimensions are represented in the table below.

Table 3. Key elements of narration and their dimensions

Key elements of narration	Dimensions
Norm.	two
Space	three
Roles	two
Mode	two
Theme	two

The listeners'-viewers' side

i. Emotional dependence of young children on narration

During storytelling most, if not all, kinds of intelligence of the child are engaged and cultivated, including the following:

1. linguistic or verbal intelligence
2. music/rhythmic
3. physical/kinaesthetic
4. emotional or interpersonal
5. intrapersonal
6. physiocognitive
7. logic/mathematical (Gardner 2011).

It goes without saying that storytellers must have assimilated and conquered - for themselves- all the above types of intelligence to a sufficient degree before telling any story, in order to properly convey to young children what is described above (Landier & Barret 1999, 192).

ii. Ages of listeners

Storytelling - or even reading fairy tales - mainly helps children of an age before they learn to read. Child psychologists state that the upper age limit is that of 7 to 8 years (Mac Naughton, 2020: 85). The youngest is, of course, the one where young children understand the meaning of what we tell them, namely 3 to 4 (Mac Naughton 2020, 87).

Generally, it is unnatural for children over 8 to want to listen to fairy tales. Nonetheless, we have also seen adults - both middle-aged and elderly - wanting to listen to a fairy tale, perhaps because it takes them back to their childhoods. Besides, the fact that adults go to the cinema or the theatre is certainly because they want to watch a different kind of fairy tale.

iii. Intelligence

The concept of intelligence is ambiguous and quite misunderstood in the field of Education. It has a lot to do with what we call “charisma”, something to which the Greek Schools are not oriented. Storytelling is an indirect “tool” for discovering such elements. We can tell if a child is smart by how much the child intervenes in the storytelling - or even through the action, i.e., the dramatization of the fairy tale - with quality questions or gestures or even suggestions. When children are smart in storytelling, they have a chance of becoming smart in other aspects of their lives (Sotiropoulou-Zormpala 2020, 120). They will project this on many levels or in other parts of their later lives: occupation, family, development, successes or failures of any kind, social life.

Conclusions

Narrative techniques are taught in higher education institutions, with the aim of making students - tomorrow's teachers - attractive to their future audience-pupils. Fairy tale narration techniques are diverse and demanding. They involve the body, the voice, but also the mental mood/ability of the narrator to be put before an audience-pupils and become as dynamic a narrator as possible. Storytellers must have assimilated and conquered all kinds of intelligence (verbal, physical, interpersonal, etc.) to a sufficient degree before telling any story, in order to properly convey to young children what we described above. In this sense and in accordance with the above, storytellers must study the intrinsic elements of a fairy tale and process them in order to attract the attention of their listeners/viewers. They should also investigate elements of their audience, namely ages, degrees of intelligence, availability to listen to fairy tales. At the same time, it is good to constantly improve both movement and speech, but also to observe/analyse other narrators, aiming to have constant mutual information and interaction.

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