

# The Power of **Story** — To Teach, to

**BY ANNA UNKOVICH**

Perhaps the most powerful tool I found in my 35-year teaching career was the *story* — telling a story, reading a story, using a story to teach a concept, to make a connection, or to inspire a group of students.

In hindsight, it all started in 3rd grade when Mrs. Ferguson read a chapter a day from the *Little House on the Prairie* book series. I could hardly wait to get to school to find out what was happening to the Ingalls family. That launched my love of story, a passion for reading, and a view of school as a wonderful place to be.

For Mrs. Ferguson, it was a *knowingness* about the power of a good tale. I doubt that she had any specific training on reading strategies to promote students' overall success in school and in life. Teaching elementary school in the 1950s, she hadn't read Jim Burke's books on the importance of reading (1999, 2000). Nor did she have Jim Trelease's *Read Aloud Handbook* (2001) to guide her to the best stories for age-appropriate concepts to be learned. She didn't have access to the plethora of research that focuses on reading and achievement that is now available.

She just *knew* that it was good teaching. Throughout history, stories have taught us custom, tradition, culture, and diversity. Stories have conjured mental images, sparked imaginations, and tapped into emotions. A good story connects us with the deepest core of our self, with other students, teachers, family, and with all of humanity. A good story takes us anywhere in time and space and introduces us to a wealth of experiences we will never

have in real life. A good story is a good friend.

Long before books, and in many indigenous cultures, stories

## Make Reading a Part of Every Class

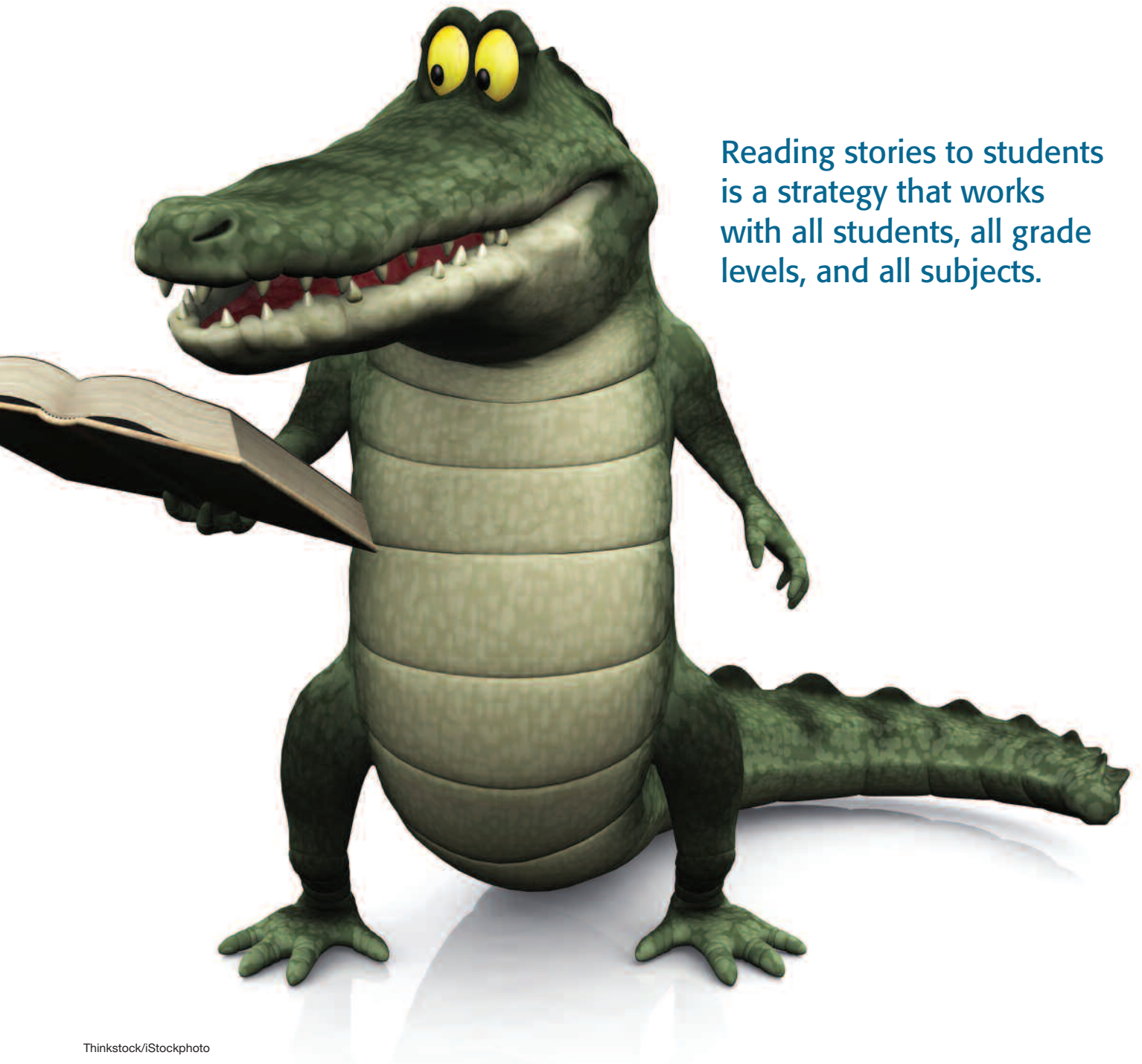
### >> Be clear about your goals.

#### What do you wish to accomplish when using a story?

- While I recommend a fair amount of reading just to elicit pleasure in the written word, the best classroom results are found when the stories are an integral part of your lesson plan.
- Do you want to build classroom character? Or do you want to inspire students to change the world? Find true stories of famous people who overcame obstacles or of youngsters who made a difference in the world.
- Do you wish to create a passion for your subject matter? In science, read stories of someone famous, like Albert Einstein, or those lesser known, such as Nikola Tesla, Edwin Hubble, or John Bardeen. In math, you could find stories of Pythagoras or Newton. Perhaps a story of the young people who marched in the Civil Rights Movement will make a history lesson more real to a classroom of black students.

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# Reach, to Inspire



Reading stories to students is a strategy that works with all students, all grade levels, and all subjects.

## >> Choose good stories.

- Select stories that are uplifting and empowering. Great literature has its place, but save the dark, heavy stories for required reading somewhere else. Students at every level respond to stories of determination, laughter, life, love, hope, even despair when it is resolved. Give them a reason to *want* to pick up a good book.
- Read true stories whenever feasible. Students want to believe that it's *possible* to accomplish their goals, and they like to hear of others who have overcome obstacles and done so.
- Choose stories that elicit emotions and create a classroom climate in which students feel safe to experience a wide range of feelings in appropriate ways. This empowers them to cope with life.
- Select stories that demonstrate actions and consequences. Life lessons are best learned from a good story, rather than from an adult giving a lecture or a "sermon."
- Pick stories that appeal to males. Females are easier to please when it comes to literature. Make a concerted effort to ignite males' interest in reading.
- Adopt stories that students can relate to — that are about life and the challenges they face.

were the only way to share history and lessons about life. In fact, history *is* a story of how we came to be — as a person, a society, or a world.

## To Teach . . .

Across all age groups, stories are an easy and natural way to learn and to get students to use their critical cogitative expertise. If you look to Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom 1956), you can find every level of thinking skill evidenced in a good story and its follow-up questions. A teacher can lead a student from simple knowledge (Who was the main character?) through comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and to evaluation (Why did the main character do what she did? What choice would you have made?). Or, to use the updated terminology: *remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating*.

When given in a lecture format, higher-level skills can overwhelm many students. When placed in the context of a story, students naturally make choices and decisions that challenge their thinking. The

story forms pathways in the brain and promotes thinking habits that carry over to other situations, other classrooms, and into students' daily lives. When students are presented with words, not visual images, they must fill in the gaps with all of the sensory details that make for a good story; they must develop their imaginations. Teachers who read to their students at every grade level offer opportunities to develop this inventive, innovative, creative part of their brains. Furthermore, reading to students may give youngsters some balance with the high-speed visual images that flash before them in this world filled with technology.

We've long known the value of a good story and of learning how to read. Reading is so important that we require it of students in every year of their schooling. However, much *required* reading today consists of catastrophic, dark, depressing, problem novels. Stories for elementary students are more often filled with humor, play, or fantasy, which are comforting elements for youngsters of any age. Yet prescribed reading at the secondary level rarely has these joyful elements (Feinberg 2004/2005: 16). Is it any wonder that our youths have become aliterates, persons who *choose not to read*, unlike the *illiterate* persons who are *unable to read*?

With hope, we look to the success of the *Harry Potter* books or to the plethora of fiction for young adults that captures their imaginations and carries them away to places of dragons and magic, of charm and illusion. Or to nonfiction that takes them back in history to learn the real lives and real challenges of people like Winston Churchill, Rosa Parks, or Cesar Chavez.

I'm not suggesting that all problem novels, painful stories, or classics be pulled from classroom shelves. But I am recommending a balance that provides young people with stories that create a sense of well-being and a *desire* to pick up a good book and to find friendship in a good story. In addition to creating an appetite to read, stories that touch children's hearts and souls create a longing to make a difference in the world.

Fast forward to me as a teacher in the 1990s and well into my career. The situation was a teacher's nightmare — five minutes left in the class period with a rowdy group of 7th graders. I looked at the clock, looked at my students, looked at the clock, and looked at my desk for anything that might magically fill the minutes. Sitting there was a Christmas present — a book of motivational short stories. I grabbed it, randomly opened it, and began reading.

I finished the story moments before the dismissal bell, breathed a sigh of relief, and thought nothing more of the matter. The next day, several students walked into class requesting more. So I gathered together short stories with messages of hope, determi-



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nation, kindness, laughter, love, and life. Thus began a classroom journey that had some very surprising side effects.

## To Reach . . .

After a week of reading stories to students, I polled all of my classes, grades 7-12, to get their reactions to this daily fare. When I received a unanimous response, I acted on this teachable moment. Since each story took only two or three minutes to read, I felt it was not taking significant time away from content. And I knew students were often unaware that they were learning something important. An added benefit was that even my most disruptive students settled down for this story routine that ended each class period.

I was creating what we now call “emotional literacy.” Without realizing it, by reading these stories each day, I was creating a classroom environment where it was safe to access and express feelings. Even more important, I was modeling this behavior for my students. If I read a sad story, I cried. Initially, my students were mortified to see a teacher crying. Later, they would occasionally request a “cry story.” There were some stories that would make us laugh so hard we would almost pee our pants!

Without ever talking about it, we were sharing our feelings on a daily basis, much as a family would do. And slowly, we became a family. Each of my five classes developed its own unique classroom bond.

Weeks passed, and I saw that my students were treating each other more respectfully. Within months, I noticed changes in the hallways throughout the school. Following a story about a potential suicide, I saw several students stop to help pick up dropped books, rather than to kick them down the hallway, laughing. The mother of a learning disabled student chased me down in a parking lot. “What have you done to my daughter? She *hates to read*, and now she wants me to buy her a book. What’s up with that?” Nonreaders were becoming readers because they couldn’t wait until the next day for me to read them a story.

As a result of this classroom family, I spent significantly less time on discipline and more time on task. Students were more interested in course content. And learning a difficult task became easier when using a story. I found that students might forget a lecture in a matter of minutes, yet would relate to me a detailed classroom story as much as 30 years later!

## To Inspire . . .

Educators must realize that they’re significant role models for many students. Together with parents, they offer the greatest impact on a youngster’s school success by the examples they set.

We can almost universally acknowledge the importance of reading, yet our children aren’t testing well on it. They’ve been raised on technology, and at every juncture they’ve been exposed to videos and television programs designed to capture the attention of our very youngest learners. In a special report in *Time* magazine (Jan. 16, 2006), it is suggested that these products *do* capture the eyes and ears of infants, despite the American Academy of Pediatrics’

### >> Good stories are everywhere.

- From the playground (a group of children stand up to the class bully) to the professional playing field (Detroit Tigers’ pitcher Armando Galarraga’s almost perfect game), there are stories to be found everywhere.
- Personal stories. Your stories make you seem more human to your students, and less of a “teaching machine.” Being authentic and sharing appropriate stories gains student respect. Just be careful of sharing anything *too personal*.
- Media — television, newspapers, magazines.
- Books filled with inspirational short stories.
- Excerpts from biographies.
- Read a chapter a day from a book that interests your students and ties into your course content.
- And what did we do before Google? Enter your topic on any search engine, and thousands of story sources will magically appear.

### >> Create good follow-up questions and activities.

- Go back to your goal. Design questions that reflect your classroom mission.
- Encourage students to seek ways to apply these stories to their lives.
- Refer to Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956), concepts that are still a standard in education, or to his revised version (Forehand 2005). Or go to Gardner’s (1983) and Armstrong’s (1999, 2009) work on multiple intelligences. Design pre- and post-questions and activities to challenge students at every level.
- Create related projects in which students can recognize their connection with, and responsibility toward, others on this planet.



recommendation of no television viewing of *any* kind before age two. I'm suggesting less technology and more human interaction for a child's optimal development — try reading them a story.

Many of today's youngsters are coming from classroom environments that are test-driven and anxiety-ridden. For some, their home life is even worse. A story may well be the best *friend* a child will

ever have. As educators, we have a duty to help youngsters to choose high-quality *friends*.

### THE ENDING TO THIS STORY

Stories can be used solely for the purpose of learning, but they can also be used for pure pleasure and for inspiring students to read. Don't underestimate either version.

Teachers can tell stories, or they can read stories. A story that is *told* has the advantage of full eye contact with audiences, allowing for awareness of body language and adjustments to suit their interest levels. A story that is *read* provides an example for students to follow. When significant role models demonstrate the beauty and power of a good story, youngsters identify with that and feel that they, too, can enjoy reading a book. To begin, choose the approach that you are most comfortable with until you can provide a balance of both telling and reading stories to students.

One of the most important things teachers can give to their students is a passion for the written word. By using stories that touch youngsters' hearts and minds, teachers can make words come alive and can light a fire for reading that will live with them forever. I welcome you on this journey! **■**

### >> Read to students at every age.

- Every time you read aloud to a class, you offer yourself as a role model. Start early, read often, and choose material full of interest and excitement that captures their attention (Trelease 2001: 99-103). In American classrooms, teachers are expected to read to elementary students. Don't underestimate the value of creating joyful reading and a habit of reading at this early age.
- Most likely, it will be your secondary students who will take the *content* of these stories out into the world in an attempt to make it better. Select stories that empower students at all ages and stages. Even my college students loved a good story with a good lesson and the opportunity to make a difference in the classroom and in the world.

### >> Make reading a joyful experience and make it a repeated experience.

- Initially, some teachers are uncomfortable reading aloud to students. With excerpts or short stories, a quick practice allows you to determine which words and phrases to emphasize in order to convey the message while allowing you to feel more comfortable with the process.
- Create a passion and a pleasure for reading. Don't always make it a lesson, or a test-question, or something to dread. It was important to me that my students *welcomed* these stories and, ultimately, the messages they contained. Furthermore, I found that the frequency was crucial in creating positive behavioral changes.
- When we foster the rapture of a story, I believe reading and writing skills will improve, vocabulary will improve, and higher test scores will result.
- The more you read to students, the better you get at it and the more your students are encouraged to read for themselves. It's just like riding a bicycle.

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