

In the Presence of Each Other: A Pedagogy of Storytelling.

Johanna Kuyvenhoven.

Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press 2009.

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Johanna Kuyvenhoven begins her book by clearly defining what she means by storytelling. She states, "When I write about storytelling I mean telling. It's an act in which a person speaks a story from memory to a listener or group of listeners" (p. 3). This definition provides an important base for framing Kuyvenhoven's ensuing description of her journey using storytelling as a teaching method. Kuyvenhoven then outlines the content of each chapter in the book and how each contributes to the development of *A Pedagogy of Storytelling*. She ends her introduction with "This was the learning that happened in a portable classroom, in a circle gathered around a storyteller and in each other's presence" (p. 7). This statement aptly sets the scene for Kuyvenhoven's experiences, descriptions of which comprise the rest of the book.

Johanna Kuyvenhoven tells the story of her research as just that: a story. This book provides a refreshing approach to reporting on research. Kuyvenhoven explains her choice of writing in this style:

I've written my explanation of this in the shape of a story. If readers follow me, chapter by chapter, they'll take a journey beginning with a setting of persons, a problem, and a place. They'll come with me into a lively classroom, crowded with talk, action, and drama. Then we'll come to an ending. But, like a good story, I hope the ending becomes another beginning. (p. 4)

In her search to examine how teaching is done through storytelling, Kuyvenhoven spent five months in a portable classroom with Linda Stender, a teacher who identified herself as a storytelling teacher. Kuyvenhoven chronicles her time, experiences, and observations in Stender's grade 4/5 classroom in British Columbia in "a neighbourhood set a few blocks away from thick streams of traffic forced through a city pressed between rivers and mountains" (p. 27). The classroom itself was an overcrowded portable classroom but, Kuyvenhoven contends, "was a happy place to be" (p. 36). Through her time in this setting, Kuyvenhoven explored what it meant to be a storytelling teacher and developed the characteristics of a pedagogy of storytelling.

In Chapter 1, Kuyvenhoven explains how her interest in storytelling grew. She was raised in a family that used stories to connect to its history. She notes that her grandmother was "an uncommonly lively storyteller" (p. 8) and that her father "told us stories during long trips in our Volkswagon station wagon, at the dinner table, and before bed. Six children grew up under his gentle rain of stories" (p. 9). Beyond her familial experiences, Kuyvenhoven describes three other pivotal experiences that led her to be interested in storytelling as teaching. The journey she took led her to find teacher Linda Stender.

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In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, Kuyvenhoven provides background information on Stender, her students, and the school setting. Kuyvenhoven describes how Stender uses storytelling in her class, describes the classroom in which she would immerse herself for five months, and describes the “Landscape and Soundscape” (p. 31) of the school and of the classroom. Kuyvenhoven uses both her observations and the words of Stender to prepare readers for the journey that follows.

The narrative shifts in Chapter 5, where Kuyvenhoven explains what separates a storytelling event from other stories that are told in a classroom. She looks through her data and struggles to organize it into categories. She tries categorizing by the types of stories told, by who is doing the telling or the listening, by the content of the story, and even by the circumstances of telling. None of these frameworks seemed to satisfy her, nor did they capture the essence of what she encountered in the classroom. She finally realizes “what was the same about all the storytellings: a pause” (p. 46). The realization that a pause was evident in every situation before or as someone embarked on telling a story was key to Kuyvenhoven’s ability to recognize storytelling events in the classroom. She notes that this pause occurred when a story was to be shared, a joke to be told, and an incident recounted. The pause is not long, but it contains expectation and anticipation of what is to follow.

In addition to the pause, a language shift is evident during a storytelling event. Kuyvenhoven calls the language that is used when storytelling “story-language” (p. 48). Kuyvenhoven explores story-language in Chapter 5 and compares its use to normal language use. She comments, “The language of a story is symbolic. In story-language, the images, events, characters call on us to think using symbols” (p. 48). The use of story-language when a story is being told is subtly different than the use of language in other situations. Not only is the language different, but, she argues, the way in which we interact with the information is different as well.

Kuyvenhoven continues to develop her description of storytelling events and begins to piece together the pedagogy of storytelling in Chapter 6. Kuyvenhoven focuses this chapter on “Talking, thinking, and imagining with storytelling” (p. 53). While talking and thinking with a story might be ideas readers have encountered before, imagining is a word that was coined by a student in the class. Kuyvenhoven describes imagining as being “thoroughly absorbed ... inside the storyworld” (p. 56) and as “inside the story experience, deeply lodged in a space beyond the room we shared” (p. 56). The students who were imagining with a story became completely unaware of their surroundings and were entrenched in the world created by the story. Imagining with a story in this context is further developed in Chapter 9.

In Chapter 7, Kuyvenhoven categorizes the three ways of participating with a story as “The Three Circles of Storytelling” (p. 59). This visual representation involves three concentric circles that illustrate the connection between the listener, others in the room, and the storyteller, while also describing various ways of participating with the story being told. This chapter felt out of place among the other chapters. Most of what was presented was either covered in the previous chapters or could have been incorporated into later chapters where Kuyvenhoven details each of the three ways of interacting with a story.

Throughout chapters 8-10, Kuyvenhoven explores these three ways of participating with a story (talking, thinking, imagining) in more depth. "Talking with stories" is represented by the outermost circle of the three circles of storytelling. She describes various ways in which students had the opportunity to share and talk with stories. Many of the stories that students shared were personal. One way that Stender's encouraged students to talk was to open the class to student-run class meetings. These allowed students to share the responsibility for leading the discussion and provided opportunity for them to contribute in varied ways each week. Kuyvenhoven concludes that allowing students to contribute to the class and to share personal stories created a sense of community in the classroom.

"Imagining with stories," the innermost circle of the three circles of storytelling, is the focus of Chapter 9. Kuyvenhoven uses her observations, student interviews, Stender's reflections, and refers to others who have done work on storytelling to develop the concept of imagining. This chapter is where Kuyvenhoven describes in depth what she perceives that students experience when they are involved in a storytelling event. It is in this chapter that Kuyvenhoven develops her "pedagogy of storytelling," which is explored further in Chapter 11. Many of the themes and ideas in Chapter 9 are developed through her observations of diverse storytelling events and through interviews with students in the class. Much of the exploration in this chapter focuses on Kuyvenhoven's main question: "what was happening during storytelling" (p. 112). Many student experiences with the same story, and with other stories, are described and analyzed. Kuyvenhoven calls on other researchers such as Kieran Egan, Howard Gardner, and Perry Nodelman to assist her in formulating an answer to her main question.

Chapter 10 focuses on "Thinking with stories," the second of the three circles of storytelling. Here Kuyvenhoven describes three ways of using storytelling in the classroom. They are "Storytelling to Understand a Concept" (p. 156), "Storytelling for Reading" (p. 161), and "Storytelling for Writing" (p. 167). Each way of interacting with a story is described using anecdotes and student interviews about their interactions with stories that have been told in the classroom. Kuyvenhoven also discusses the "sticky quality of the story" (p. 176) in reference to a student's ability to remember specific content from a story and how stories can help students remember obscure information. This stands in contrast to Kuyvenhoven's definition of storytelling introduced at the outset of this book. The use of stories or mnemonics to help students remember is not congruent with her earlier discussion of the nature and purpose of storytelling. She claims that stories that help students remember are "a good parlour trick, sometimes necessary and valuable, but a trick nonetheless" (p. 182). Although students are able to remember the specific rules or conventions introduced with a story used in this way, according to Kuyvenhoven, imagining would not occur and therefore these "tricks" cannot be considered storytelling events.

Kuyvenhoven brings together her ideas and stories into a discussion of the pedagogy of storytelling in Chapter 11. She comments that "Many of the ideas found in this book are not new" (p. 185) but goes on to say that "The life force of the pedagogy of storytelling is not fully realized until children imagine their ways into storyworld life in the midst of the classroom" (p. 186). As I read

through this book, I began to understand that storytelling is more than just telling or reading a story to your students: it is allowing the story to fill the classroom space and to transport all those in it to another world where time passes differently and each person's imagining of that world is unique to him or her. By this point in the book, Kuyvenhoven has proved her point.

In the final chapter, Kuyvenhoven offers advice to teachers who would like to become storytelling teachers. I appreciated this chapter as I was intrigued about using storytelling in my classroom, yet I was not sure where to begin. Kuyvenhoven breaks down the process of becoming a storytelling teacher into four parts: "listening for storytelling; finding a story; learning the story; and finally, telling the story" (p. 195). After detailing how one can hone one's skills as a storyteller, she concludes the book by writing, "The gift of a story told and shared in the presence of each other may become the hope, wisdom, and laughter needed over the course of a lifetime. May my readers receive and give this gift" (p. 202). I feel that I received this gift, and I hope to pass it on. The final chapter provided a wonderful conclusion to both the book and the journey along which Kuyvenhoven had invited her readers to follow. I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in using stories in the classroom to enhance their teaching.