**Storyline** is an innovative approach to teaching curriculum that Hathaway Brown Early Childhood and Primary School teachers use to make learning meaningful. From an early childhood unit on farm life to a fourth grade discussion of women’s rights during the period of settlement, students make the world come to life through the power of narrative. Learn more about how this program has come together, and why HB students and teachers can’t get enough of Storyline.

Stretching Minds is dedicated to informing parents about relevant topics and current research in the field of Early Childhood and Primary Education.

Jacob Bronowski, 20th century writer and mathematician, once said, “It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it.”

The quote came back to me (the essence of it anyway—I looked it up later) after visiting a classroom of 4-year-olds where a Storyline narrative was in full swing. On that particular day, the children, who had been building a barn, came in to find that their carefully constructed barns and outbuildings had been flooded and the animals were in danger. With the kind of efficiency and teamwork that FEMA can only aspire to, the animals were moved to high ground, a “water-sucking-up machine” was invented on the spot, and disaster was averted. The children, however, did not stop there—they decided that the water in their machine was a valuable resource, and should be put to good use elsewhere. I don’t remember the final decision as to where the water would be sent, but having been in on many committee meetings, the thoughtful reflection of the group conversation left a strong impression.

Continued on page 2.
Focus on Storyline: Narrative as a Bridge to Learning

Continued from cover.

In the meantime, the 4th graders upstairs were engaged in a Storyline narrative involving a more complex set of issues as Native Americans and European settlers struggled with territorial disputes and cultural clashes. When the women characters (on both sides) found that they could not be involved in negotiations of any kind simply due to their gender, the universal reaction was outrage, and the discussions that followed transcended the narrative.

Any good teacher will leave room for questions and discussions in presenting a lesson. Using the Storyline method, however, the questions are posed at the beginning of the lesson. These “key questions” draw on the children’s prior knowledge, helping them to articulate what they know, as well as what they need to find out. The narrative structure gives them not only a framework for learning, but a personal connection to their research.

The History of Storyline

The Storyline approach was developed in Glasgow, Scotland in response to recommendations that the Primary schools begin using a more child-centred, integrated approach to curriculum that better reflected research-based best practices in education. Sallie Harkness, one of the original educators involved in the project, describes how Storyline met that criteria.

“The Storyline method poses problems and asks questions of pupils rather than giving the answers to questions they have never asked. The pupils and the teacher explore ideas together. This approach...draws the curriculum together using the environment and social subjects as a stimulus to explore, and using expressive arts and language as a means of discussing, describing and explaining. Research and reference skills are extended as pupils are encouraged to search for answers.”

Storyline is currently used in Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Thailand, and parts of the United States. Hathaway Brown is the first school to adopt the Storyline methodology in the central states.

How Does Storyline Work?

Although the unfolding of a Storyline narrative is a lot like improv, there are characters, costumes, props, and unexpected events, the choice of topic begins with the teacher, and the structure is carefully designed. Specific curricular goals are identified ahead of time and woven into the action. A study of ocean life, for example, may be framed by creating a fishing village on the east coast.

The narrative line is moved forward by a sequence of episodes outlined by the teacher ahead of time, each designed to focus on key concepts. Each episode is introduced to the children through a series of questions, which vary according to grade level. The “fishing village” storyline, for example, might be developed as follows:

Episode 1: Setting

What is a village? What do you think a fishing village is like? What would you find in a fishing village?

For older children, a prologue might come in the form of a newspaper article, a letter, or a package that can serve as a focal point for generating questions. In the process of answering questions and sharing information, the children may end up building 3D models of facilities and boats, or researching sea life.

Episode 2: Characters

Who are some of the people who might live in the village? The children create their own characters, complete with biographical info.

Episode 3 and 4: Initiating Incidents

The storyline comes to life—a boat might overset, a whale runs aground, a hurricane threatens. The children brainstorm solutions, and the plot thickens.

Episode 5: Culminating Event

A satisfactory conclusion may involve entertaining a visiting expert, taking a trip to an aquarium, or inviting the parents in to see the exhibit. As with any good story, the ending is as important as the beginning.

Review and Reflection

The children are encouraged to reflect on the highlights, difficulties, and knowledge acquired through the Storyline experience. This can take the form of discussion, journaling, artwork, videotaping, etc.

Assessment: What Are They Really Learning?

Although assessment is a necessary and integral part of Storyline, test-taking is not. Central to the planning that takes place before the narrative is introduced to the children is the identification by the teacher of the main outcomes and the means of assessing their achievement. Ian Barr, a member of the Scottish Council on Curriculum, emphasizes that “assessment evidence comes essentially in three forms: in what children say, in what children write, and in what children do. In Storyline, opportunities abound for assessment.”

The most important assessment, however, may well be the self-assessment that the children engage in throughout the Storyline process. In the words of a 5th grader after completing Storyline topic work: “What we did was make standards for ourselves. Those are the standards that we have to meet. Usually people do their best. So if you have to meet a certain standard that you think is too high, it’s too bad, because you set it.”

And the ability to measure achievement in those terms is, as they say, priceless.

Creating a Storyline Narrative

My son Jordan, a naturally inquisitive 4th grader, was full of questions one day as I was researching tropical fish for a Storyline narrative. “Mommy, let me research a fish,” he finally said, “and I’ll write a report for you.” And I realized that I was in front of the perfect opportunity to bring Storyline out of the classroom and into my own living room.

The first thing I did was to pull out a map of the world. “What country are you interested in finding out about?” I asked. After some serious perusal, Jordan decided he’d like to learn about Iceland. “When will my Storyline start?” “You’ll know,” I told him.

I then wrote and mailed a letter to Jordan from a character I called “Ike Traveller.” Ike was a representative from the “World Encyclopedia Company” who was looking to update information about landforms and animals in Iceland. Ike needed an explorer. Jordan received the letter and immediately signed on the dotted line.

Lori Yates found that as she researched Storyline elements at home to use in her classroom, her own children were watching over her shoulder. The result was an unexpected and lively turn of events as Storyline became a family-affair. Lori describes how it happened.

In a real-life follow-up, one of my colleagues at HB met a teacher at a Storyline conference who’s from Iceland and happens to have a son in the 4th grade. So it looks like Jordan could have an email buddy in the near future!
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After a time, we introduced “incidents” which then allowed further stories to develop. Our first two situations involved animals getting out of their pasture overnight, and a strange visitor. The children were eager to be able to play with something that they fully created, but the introduction of complicated incidents made the whole project absolutely thrilling. And now, we were about to embark on our third and final episode...

It’s now 8:15 a.m. On a typical morning, our students enter the classroom, greet their teachers, engage in a daily ritual involving a simple, skill-based activity, and make their way over to the math games or blocks to begin free play; but not today, not during storyline! We are both completely by-passed and the children move steadily toward our farm table. They are aghast with what they see!

“There’s a flood!”

“It’s (the pond) overflowed!”

“There was a wind and it blew, and it blew the water everywhere!”

“AHHH! There’s tons of ponds—Hey! How did they all get there? It’s so strange!”

“Oh! OH! It’s flooded!! The animals! Oh! Oh!”

As the remainder of the class arrives, each child is greeted at the door by concerned yet excited classmates, who promptly inform them of our recent “disaster.” By the end of our morning, the children have discussed floods, the causes and effects of flooding, and decide that they must take action!! A “water machine” is assembled with great enthusiasm and care. The children work cooperatively to maneuver the device to the table, where the great flood water (made with recycled blue bags from the local grocery store) is sucked up, and carefully placed into huge “water towers.” A huge sigh of relief is heard through the room amongst smiles and hugs of congratulations. Another day of “Storyline” is over. What will happen next?

For the last few weeks, we have been participating in an experience called “Storyline.” This “teaching methodology allows teachers and pupils to construct jointly the curriculum so that it addresses children’s interest” (UK Literacy Assoc., 2003). We began by involving our students in very basic conversations about farms and animals. Over the course of time, we were able to research farm life, and design a beautiful, child-constructed farm environment. The students used simple supplies to create their own animal character. Additional farm necessities were assembled (a milk carton became a tractor, popsicle sticks were transformed into a pig’s trough), and imaginative play took over!

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It’s 8:10 a.m. Three noses are pressed against the glass classroom door. As we look out at the children, we can almost see the wheels spinning in their little heads…

“I can see it…look there’s our farm!”

“I wonder what will happen today?”

“Do you think the animals escaped again?”

The anticipation on our students’ faces says it all.
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**Stretching Minds**: Through the Storyline method, children integrate concepts and skills using the vehicle of an unfolding narrative. How do you adapt the same structure to meet the developmental needs of 4-year-olds as well as 9-year-olds?

**Julie**: When Mary and Lois invited us upstairs to see how they were using Storyline with 4th graders last spring, I was so inspired by their energy. I was especially impressed by the art work that I saw, along with the potential for integrating oral language into the classroom. Lori and I decided that we would try it because it seemed like such a natural thing to do with preschoolers. Quite honestly, we weren’t sure how it would go. But we did know that the children love storytelling, are incredibly engaged in their creations, and take real pride in their work. A horse made out of cardboard and pipe cleaners may not look much like a horse to us, but to the children, their animals come alive.

**Mary**: At the preschool level, oral language is central to literacy development. At the higher levels, we can incorporate a broader range of literacy skills. Why do we read non-fiction? How do we pull out the information that we need? The girls have a reason to do the research, and a reason to write about it—the story needs to move forward. One of my students created a character who came to this country on a boat. She became very invested in finding out what boat it might have been, and ended up calling the library and doing some genealogical research because the authenticity was so important to her.

**Lois**: We’ve all talked about the engagement of the students. And their engagement in this process was extraordinary. The girls would walk in at the beginning of the school day, see “Storyline” in the daily plan on the board, and literally cheer. And there are wonderful opportunities for cooperative learning and curricular integration in Storyline. We worked with Joyce Queen in Science class, Laura Webster in Music, we integrated technology. Everything in the curriculum can come together in Storyline.

**Julie**: And in creating a machine, they had to compromise and problem-solve as a group—we just supplied the materials, then stood back and watched them work. It was a remarkable experience. And the machine worked! They took it to the table and with great satisfaction stuffed in the blue plastic bags that represented the water.

**Lois**: Anytime you tell a story, there are twists in the plot and that’s what keeps the story alive. The children are engaged in the situation they themselves have created in a problem-solving context. They have to learn to compromise, have discussions—and I’m sure we see that at all levels.

**Lori**: Exactly. When the children walked in and found that the farm had been flooded—an incident that Julie and I created—the conversations and brainstorming started immediately. We generated some questions—What could cause a flood? Is it a good thing? A bad thing? What can we do about it? The children came up with some great ideas—put the animals on higher ground, make a machine that can suck up water. And they worked on that machine all morning.

**Mary**: In our setting we had a kidnapping, and it was necessary to negotiate the release of the victim. When the women tried to enter the negotiations, they were sent back, because women were not allowed to be a part of the negotiating party. And they were seething. They talked about the experience later in the context of the Northwest Ordinance, because in order to be able to vote you had to be a man and a landowner. And they really understood the unfairness of this.

**Julie**: And they could make that leap—this is pretend, but it’s also real. Which is wonderful—and is seems that at the 4th grade level, they’re still able to live in that state of “suspended disbelief.”

**Lois**: The drama is definitely a part of the process. At the 4th grade level, it’s also linked to the research they’ve done.

**Mary**: They become so thoroughly engaged in the story. They came in at lunch and play period to add things to the tableau—a little basket, a butter churn, an animal. It just didn’t stop when class was over.

**Lori**: The children in our class became much more attached to the table-top farm they had created than to the more elaborate farm that we had set up in the Dramatic Play area. When they were told that it was time to take the farm down and move it to the next class, they were upset until they realized that we meant the Dramatic Play area farm. They told the other class, “Oh, you can have that one, but you can’t take the farm.”

**Lois**: The children in our class became much more attached to the table-top farm they had created than to the more elaborate farm that we had set up in the Dramatic Play area.

**Mary**: In the Dramatic Play area farm. They told the other class, “Oh, you can have that one, but you can’t take the farm.”

**Julie**: When I first started using Storyline, I was so excited about the idea that this could be a way to stretch the minds of the children and heighten their engagement. One of the girls really began to understand that the Europeans coming in and imposing their own cultural mores was unfortunate.

**Lois**: The girls really began to understand that the Europeans coming in and imposing their own cultural mores was unfortunate.

**Mary**: Because they’d experienced it. And it seems like that could have a larger impact on their world view. To look at another culture with the attitude that they may well know something that we don’t know.

**Lois**: Remember, part of our Storyline was putting together two very different cultural groups in the same environment, with each girl taking the role of either a Native American or an early settler. They were living the conflicts that arose.

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**Julie**: Our youngest child, who was always trying to keep up, looked at the farm one day and said, “We need a tractor.” And he got so invested in making one that the other children also got into the project. When we went to Lake Farmpark and they actually saw a tractor, they became very excited, and said, “Look! There’s the tractor!” They gave his ideas validity.

**Lois**: Basic to education is the concept that you learn better when you process materials in a variety of ways. So our girls are reading the information, discussing, building, role-playing, problem-solving. Mary has a great story about her girls figuring out how to build a wigwam.

**Mary**: Trying and trying and trying—using string, tape, glue guns, and it kept collapsing. One of the girls finally said, “You know, the Native Americans were just geniuses. I don’t know how they ever figured this out.” It was a very concrete lesson.

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An interview with four teachers who created Storyline communities

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**Mary:** They become so thoroughly engaged in the story. They came in at lunch and play period to add things to the tableau—a little basket, a butter churn, an animal. It just didn't stop when class was over.

**Lori:** The children in our class became much more attached to the table-top farm they had created than to the more elaborate farm that we had set up in the Dramatic Play area. When they were told that it was time to take the farm down and move it to the next class, they were upset until they realized that we meant the Dramatic Play area farm. They told the other class, “Oh, you can have that one, but you can't take the farm.”

**Julie:** And in creating a machine, they had to compromise and problem-solve as a group—we just supplied the materials, then stood back and watched them work. It was a remarkable experience. And the machine worked! They took it to the table and with great satisfaction stuffed it in the blue plastic bags that represented the water.