



# stretching minds

## Focus on Storyline: Narrative as a Bridge to Learning

by Jane Brown, *Director of Early Childhood*

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 farm, 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.

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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-centered, 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 improvisational theatre, complete with 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 overturn, a whale run aground, a hurricane threaten. 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.





Do Try This at Home



## Creating a Storyline Narrative



*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.*

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 Travelle." 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.

Jordan then created his first character, "Mike," who would set out to explore Iceland. Mike also hired "George" to go with him. We talked a lot about what kind of equipment an explorer would need, and outfitted Mike and George with the appropriate tools and clothing, including Walkie-talkies and an all-terrain vehicle made from Legos.

There were some close calls for the explorers. The first "incident" occurred when George got lost. He could communicate with his Walkie-talkie, but had to closely describe his surroundings so that Mike could give him directions back to camp. It was also necessary to make some repairs to their vehicle along the way.

Eventually the intrepid explorers completed their mission. A pamphlet was created for the "World Encyclopedia Company" including a detailed topographical map of Iceland with a key showing where the indigenous animals could be found.

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!

Hello Lori,

I'm happy to hear you got hooked on Storyline! I've been using the method for some years and I'm still hooked on it. I'm teaching 4th class English and my youngest son is in my class. He is very interested to send an email to your son. It would be a good practice for him in English. We will be in contact and I wish you all the best with your Storyline project.

Best wishes from Iceland,

Laura Ann Howser



# Listening In...

## A Prekindergarten Storyline Experience



Julie Harris and Lori Yates

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.**

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!

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!"**

**"One of the animals is up in the building... my duck!"**

**"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?

# EC and Prime: Innovators and Storytellers

Storyline is an integrated approach to curriculum that uses a narrative structure as a framework for learning. Hathaway Brown is the first school in the central states to pilot Storyline.

Mary Boutton and Lois Cameron, 4th grade teachers, were awarded an HB Catalyst Grant to attend a Storyline workshop, followed by the International Storyline Conference in Glasgow in 2006. Mary and Lois consequently developed a Storyline narrative as a framework for their unit on Ohio History which covers the culture clash between the settlers and Native Americans.

Inspired by the excitement and energy of the 4th graders, Julie Harris and Lori Yates, two of our Early Childhood teachers, developed a Storyline narrative for our prekindergarten children focusing on the farm.

In July, HB faculty attended a week-long Storyline in-service given by two of the original trainers of the Storyline methodology in the United States. Over the next two years, Storyline will begin to be implemented throughout the Early Childhood and Primary School at HB.



Clockwise:

Photo 1:

4th grade students research and construct native Ohio trees for their Storyline project.

Photo 2:

Early Childhood students learn the Spanish words for their farm animals with Señora Tonkin.

Photo 3:

HB students problem solve the best way to construct a traditional Shawnee wigwam.

Photo 4:

HB students develop and construct their own Storyline characters.



# STORYLINE IN ACTION

An interview with  
four teachers who  
created Storyline  
communities



**Julie Harris and  
Lori Yates, co-teachers in a  
pre-kindergarten classroom,  
along with Mary Boutton  
and Lois Cameron, 4th grade  
teachers, discuss how the  
Storyline structure can work  
with a range of students,  
in age as well as in  
learning styles.**

**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 4<sup>th</sup> 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**.

**Stretching Minds:** It seems as though Storyline incidents are often discrepant events—the children are surprised by an unexpected turn in the narrative. How does this effect learning? Does novelty stimulate cognition?

**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.

**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.



**Stretching Minds:** And they could make that leap—this is pretend, but it's also real. Which is wonderful—and it seems that at the 4<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 *this* farm."



**Stretching Minds:** Unlike many teaching methodologies, it seems that the Storyline structure is at least as visual as it is language-based. Is this structure designed primarily for a certain kind of learner, or is it equally beneficial for all learners?

**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.

**Stretching Minds:** 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.

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

**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.

**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.

**Stretching Minds:** Because they'd experienced it.

**Mary:** They knew how it felt to be disenfranchised.

**Stretching Minds:** We've talked about how you all have set up "incidents", discrepant events that are part of the Storyline structure. Do the children ever set up surprises for you? Does the narrative take unexpected turns as you share responses?

**Lois:** With the kidnapping situation in my class, the European family, who was distraught, went through all kinds of negotiations to get the girl back. But the girl who created this character created her as quite a rebel, and what she insisted on doing was staying with the Native American family. And she justified that with reference to what she had written about her character.

**Mary:** An important aspect of the Storyline method is how it respects the learner. It respects what they know, and what they want to know. It is truly learner-driven. This is especially important for the kids who are more reticent, or who feel they don't have the ability to excel when reading and writing is presented in a more formal way. But once they have this outlet for their artistic side, these children begin to emerge as leaders, often for the first time. Children with attention issues are also more successful, because they can move around, create, be active—and all of sudden, we see them come to life as learners.

**Lois:** Also girls with organizational skills—you can begin to tell which ones will most likely be running a major corporation.

**Mary:** And you don't see those strengths if you're just teaching a lesson—there's no chance to.

**Stretching Minds:** Did you see different personalities emerging that way in EC?

**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.

**Stretching Minds:** You've taken them beyond academics. The children are discovering what it means to be a contributing member of a community, and hopefully they'll take that with them wherever they go.