

Intercultural Storytelling

"Folk Tales and Stories – Making them Travel"

Prof. Dr. Winfred Kaminski
Faculty of Applied Social Sciences
University of Applied Sciences, Cologne

Aims

The project was primarily targeted at educators, teachers, and students of social pedagogy, whom we intended to acquaint and familiarize with the narrative tradition of another country. Thus, we considered it important to share the oriental tradition of the "hakawati" (coffeehouse storyteller) and the type of stories he narrates, for example tales from "Arabian Nights" or other oriental countries with their specific stock of characters.

Participants in the programme were to re-develop free narrative skills themselves (as distinct from reading to an audience) so that they would be able to follow and revive the oral tradition. It was our intention to train this important capability and to transmit it to the extent where our course participants would in turn be able to instruct others, thus spreading a receptiveness for intercultural tradition.

With this aim in view we designed and conducted courses with between 6 and 10 participants, using experienced male and female narrators. Participants subsequently went out to establish their own narration groups (in kindergartens, day-care centers, schools and youth centers) which allowed them to pass on their freshly acquired skills while carrying the narrative content further afield.

The results achieved were twofold. On the one hand, story-telling skills were improved; on the other, new and hitherto unknown stories from different traditions were made more widely known. It was found highly fruitful to absorb the respective cultural context of the course participants directly and to benefit from each particular folk tale tradition present.

Contents

Medium:

The medium addressed in this cultural studies project was chiefly language, as represented by oral narration and tradition. This direct form of communication affords an opportunity to familiarize social groups of different cultural and/or ethnic background with each other's specific heritage without having to rely on extensive material resources. We had placed the focus on German/Turkish contacts, and specifically on folk tales and stories from these two cultural environments, having had occasion to note an exceedingly low degree of mutual acquaintance with typical characters from the tradition of the two cultures in the respective other language.

Subject:

Apart from educational events with a primarily technical background these were mainly designed to develop new stories and make cultural traditions more widely known. The traditional narratives examined ranged from Slavonic (mention should merely be made here of the important Russian folk tale character "Baba-Yaga", a witch differing greatly from its counterparts in Grimm's fairy tales) to South European, mainly Turkish. Two heroes enjoyed particularly by the adult listeners and, subsequently, their young audiences, were Nasreddin Hoca and Karagöz. Both are integral parts of the Turkish cultural heritage but virtually unknown in Germany; we have parallel figures in Till Eulenspiegel and Kasper, or Punch.

Up to this moment, about 20 adults have taken part in the narration courses. All were from the greater Cologne area: teachers, educators, students, social workers. About four afternoon exercise classes (of 3 hours' duration each) were usually necessary and sufficient. The related public storytelling afternoons and evenings were attended by an average 25 visitors (adults and children, depending on the theme). The venues selected for these narration events were schools, libraries, day-care centers and other educational institutions.

Story-telling activities:

Each of us has engaged in narration at some point. We all tell stories (long and short, low or tall), often anecdotes, or – more frequently still – jokes, as well as the occasional excuse or untruth. There are "born" storytellers, but like many other things, oral narration can be taught and rehearsed.

There are many occasions for narration, and almost as many genres: adventure stories, travel stories, love and disaster stories, stories from school and so on. Imagination is the only limit. Usually we associate oral narration – which is what interests us here – with the telling of folk (or "fairy") tales, but we are all thrilled instantly by fantastic or fictitious ("cock-and-bull") stories, the yarn of the hunter or sailor, or indeed any other form of exaggerating account – whether as part of the audience or as narrator. What matters is the aspect of oral performance.

Where, when and to whom do we tell stories? Storytelling is widespread for instance, in the pub, at children's bedtime, in a circle of travel companions, in school or kindergarten, in retirement homes and by a invalid's bedside. In actual fact, stories of illness (or about the ill) are probably among those most frequently told. What we care about is immediacy; the product itself is not the important thing, but the process of narrating, the finished story does not matter as much as the development of the narrative face-to-face with an audience.

Stories are told across all social groups, by old and young, women and men, privately or publicly, formerly in the spinning room, now in the coffee shop. Our first stories are usually rooted in biography but soon overstep these bounds, evolving into independent narratives, hopefully, worth listening to in their own right.

Narration has undergone a reevaluation in recent years because of the personal encounter it involves, the teller's unique voice, the direct form of address, all of which is pitted against the power of modern communication technology. In the eyes of Volker Klotz, the Stuttgart-based German literature scholar, even literary narration often sticks to oral storytelling devices and turns out to be an exercise in "talking to keep death at bay", i.e., storytelling keeps us alive. He was referring to the narrative circles in Boccaccio's "Decameron", to "Arabian Nights" and Sheherezade's storytelling skills, as well as to the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers.

The process of narrating offers a utopian model of life that succeeds despite the threatening loss of human interaction. The depths penetrated by storytelling become clear if we remember its role in the confessional box and, later on, psychoanalysis. But if oral storytelling obviously meets a need of the soul, this is only one aspect. Another function, important *inter alia* in kindergarten and school, reveals itself if we consider that narration is also a fundamental form of teaching. In his classic book on didactics of that title, the Swiss Hans Aebli (1976) emphasises that in the cultures of the past that knew neither book nor script, education and training as we know it was imparted by narration.

In order to convey something to an interlocutor, I must adapt my narration to his level. For instance, when addressing children (specifically in a multicultural context), I should allow for the fact that they still have undifferentiated, general ideas and that, as a result, their concepts are simpler, to the point of being one-dimensional. This implies that their thought processes are less flexible, the more so the younger they are. The narrator must therefore choose his words carefully – he should not operate with concepts, but describe actions, and should present specific behaviour instead of referring to decisions or virtues. The experiential dimension takes priority over the matter-of-fact, scientific one. Action remains in the foreground of the narrative; by applying the “genetic principle” I present and explain matters in their evolution.

Oral storytelling does not abide by a fixed wording, it is all about extemporizing, whether at the family table or in the bazaar of Istanbul where the *hakawati* charms his audience with stories from Arabian Nights. What matters in oral narration is not the reliable version, but the “ever-changing variation”, the infinite changes made depending on the audience, time and place. "The narrator invents his wording the moment he tells the story." (J. Merkel)

There is one additional peculiarity of oral narration: we cannot luxuriantly embroider the story, lest we may lose our grasp on the audience. So the story must move forward. The weight must remain on the action, on graphic images. Our facial expressions and gestures must enrich the story and help captivate the listener. Oral storytelling is successful when the narrator is not just a speaker, but plays and acts at the same time. Our narration needs a clear-cut dramaturgic structure, it requires obvious patterns and schemes. In the interests of both narrator and audience, the plot must not get too entangled.

In general it appears necessary to memorize not words but plot sequences, possibly by closing the eyes and reviewing the story like an internal motion picture. We can then extemporize along the images thus committed to memory, can fill them with new life linguistically, and as we do so we are already telling the story. Key words linked to individual turns of the plot are helpful, and are supported by physical expressions and gestures. We must ask ourselves: How specifically are we representing something? What should we merely suggest? When and how do we involve the spectators? We need not fear repetition, quite the contrary is true: repetition does not hurt an orally transmitted story because it creates moments of rest and sets rhythmic cadences. Moreover, it facilitates reception by the audience. As is evident from the example of the fairy tale, formulaic devices help generate a graphic and lively image.

Now if we look around, it appears that narrative skills are on the wane, what with all the stories around us. There is more than the narrative side to this, for the ability to tell stories is contingent on the ability to listen. Narrating is not a form of one-way communication, the listeners play a role in creating the story. Through our narration we pass on experience, attitude and emotions. The act of listening and that of storytelling

are two mutually contingent processes, and the more I am able to slip into both roles, the more oral narration will become an active part of everyday life.

Methods:

The courses were held mainly in seminar format, in the form of day or evening classes. Completing the programme enabled our professionally active participants to continue the work within their respective institutions while deepening their understanding of other cultural traditions on their own. As the stories thus began to "travel", the indigenous culture was enriched with new elements from the folk tradition of the migrants. In addition, a measure of linguistic exchange took place, since audiences (particularly those consisting of children) often wanted to hear and learn to understand words from the respective other culture, which boosted the confidence, e.g., of Turkish participants whose language is not regarded particularly highly in Germany.

Best practices

In our everyday life we narrate, for instance, when describing events, sometimes we even communicate delicately designed stories. In each case, the purpose is to "transfer experience" (K. Ehlich) – this has been true in the past and is still true today, both intra- and interculturally. Narrating helps overcome isolation and allows us to share, specifically in foreign cultures. Integrated into the more general reference frame of human activity, it impacts our ability to make ourselves understood and to understand others. Invariable, something happens to the listener and the narrator at the same time. It thus becomes clear that the act of jointly making up, "inventing", and telling a story is a particular type of "social practice" (Merkelbach/Clausen) that must be present in school and in many other places at various distinct times.

It is the task of pedagogy to promote the process of narration through specific activities. To achieve this, occasions for narration must be provided to give both German and non-German participants an opportunity to relate positively to linguistic expression and generate encouragement. Needless to say, care must be taken to ensure that these storytelling occasions address aspects of the respective multicultural background.

Evaluation

Overall, the idea of multicultural storytelling can be viewed as a highly fruitful one, although at times the sheer logistic aspects proved burdensome. While it is easy to find partner institutions who are prepared to play the listening (i.e., consuming) part, motivating them to carry the narrative process further (i.e., to participate actively) tended to be more difficult. Consequently, the idea of our "travelling folk tale project" was not always easy to implement.

However, once the event program was launched, it turned out that interest remained high and courage grew; the readiness to try one's own hand at narrating increased markedly. We know of several follow-up projects currently taking place in the Cologne region.

Intercultural narrating is an inexpensive yet promising technique for acquiring and promoting intercultural competence. It arouses curiosity about other peoples' cultures and strengthens the willingness to accept and appreciate matters new and foreign.

Services

- Hans Aebli „Erzählen und Referieren“ [Narrating and Speaking] in the same author's „Grundformen des Lehrens. Eine allgemeine Didaktik(...)“ [Fundamental Forms of Teaching. General didactics ...], Stuttgart, Klett Verlag 1976, p. 19-49
- Claus Clausen, Valentin Merkelbach (ed.): „Erzählwerkstatt. Mündliches Erzählen“ [Narrating Workshop. Oral Storytelling] Braunschweig, Westermann Verlag 1995 (Praxis Pädagogik)
- Konrad Ehlich (ed.) „Erzählen im Alltag“ [Narrating in Everyday Life] Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp Verlag 1980 (stw 323)
- Winfred Kaminski/Bernt Gigas "Erzähl doch mal" [Come On, Give us a Story] Mainz, Grünewald Verlag 1998
- Johannes Merkel, Michael Nagel „Erzählen. Die Entdeckung einer vergessenen Kunst. Geschichte und Anregungen: Ein Handbuch“ [Narrating. The Discovery of a Forgotten Art. History and Suggestions: A Manual] Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt Verlag 1982 (rororo 7061)
- „Erzählen in der Grundschule“ [Narrating in Elementary School] Hessisches Institut für Lehrerfortbildung, Reinhardswaldschule 1993, 163 pages
- Christel Oehlmann „Garantiert Erzählen lernen. Ein Übungsbuch“ [Learning Narration with Guaranteed Success. An Exercise Book], Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt Verlag 1995, 288 pages
- Jack Zipes "Creative Story-telling. Building Community, Changing Lives" New York and London, Routledge Publishing 1995, 267 pages