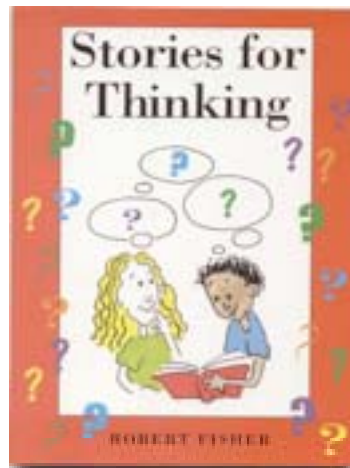


# STORIES FOR THINKING

Robert Fisher



## Workshop materials: Introduction, Stories and Discussion Plans

- **Stories for Thinking: an introduction**
- **Stories: what to discuss**
- **The Monkey and her Baby: story**
- **The Monkey and her Baby: discussion plans**
- **The Bear that Spoke: story**
- **The Bear that Spoke: discussion plans**
- **The Willow Pattern: story**
- **Books by Robert Fisher**

## Stories for Thinking: an introduction

Stories for thinking is about enjoying stories but also about making them adventures in thinking. It is a form of dialogic teaching that helps develop comprehension through questioning and discussion between children and teachers and between children and children. It applies the principles of Philosophy for Children to the stories that you and your children read.

Researchers have reported striking cognitive gains through this approach in the classroom, in enhancing comprehension and verbal reasoning skills. It also helps develop habits of intelligent behaviour in children including being:

- *Curious* – through asking deep and interesting questions
- *Collaborative* – through engaging in thoughtful discussion
- *Critical* – through giving reasons and evidence
- *Creative* – through generating and building on ideas
- *Caring* – through developing awareness of self and others

What 'Stories for Thinking' offers is a tried and tested strategy for helping children to apply critical and creative reasoning not only to stories but also to poems, pictures and other texts. The teaching strategy, based on whole class or group discussion, is called 'community of enquiry'. It is not a new strategy, but one that is in use in more than 30 countries world-wide, helping children to become critical and creative readers across the curriculum.

How does it work in the classroom? Ideally the group sits in a circle or horse-shoe, the aim being that everyone can see everyone else. The following are typical stages in a lesson:

### A Stories for Thinking lesson

- *Focusing* – introducing the session, reminding the agreed rules, ensuring alert yet relaxed attention by possibly using a relaxation exercise or thinking game
- *Sharing a stimulus* – presenting a story, poem, picture or other stimulus for thinking
- *Thinking time* – children think of what is strange interesting or unusual about the stimulus and share their thoughts with a partner
- *Questioning* - children ask their own (or partner's) questions which are written on a board, these are discussed and one is chosen to start the enquiry
- *Discussing* - children are asked to respond, building on each others' ideas, with the teacher probing for reasons, examples and alternative viewpoints
- *Reviewing* – review the discussion (eg using a graphic map), inviting last words from children to reflect on the discussion, making links to real situations and any future work

For more on the theory and practice of Philosophy for Children see *Teaching Thinking: Philosophical Enquiry in the Classroom* by Robert Fisher or visit [www.sapere.org.uk](http://www.sapere.org.uk)

For ways of using stories with children see *Stories for Thinking* and *First Stories for Thinking*. For more on Robert Fisher's books see [www.teachingthinking.net](http://www.teachingthinking.net)

## Stories: what to discuss

The following are some of the problematic features of a story:

### 1. *Temporal order*

All stories express a unique pattern of events over time. Sometimes these events are chronological, but they occur in 'human time' rather than in 'clock time', that is time made significant by the human meaning of events in the plot. To ask children to reconstruct the temporal events of a story is to do more than merely to exercise their memory, it is to provide the challenging task of narrative reconstruction and meaning-making. Questions to ask include: *'Who remembers what happened in the story?' 'What happened in the beginning/middle/end?' 'What does 'Once upon a time' mean?'*

### 2. *Particular events*

Stories are made meaningful by particular happenings. These particular events fall into patterns that become story types and genre. Each particular event, and groups or patterns of events are open to interpretation. The usual locus of the drama of a story is trouble or conflict of some kind. Of particular relevance in any story are precipitating events, where problems become apparent. It is in the comprehending of particular problems through interpretation that the educative power of stories lay, not simply in understanding the plot. Questions to ask about events include: *'What kind of event/episode/story is it?' 'Why did this event happen/what caused it?' 'What exactly happened?' 'What could have happened?' 'What should have happened?' 'What could/should happen next?'*

### 3. *Intentions*

Stories are about people (or animals, robots, magical beings etc.) with intentional states such as beliefs, desires, theories, values and so on. Problems arise because it is not always clear what a given character's intentional states are and intentional states do not necessarily determine events. Human intentions presupposes some element of choice or freedom to choose. We can only interpret by *reflecting* from our own experience how a character feels or perceives. Every outer adventure has an inner adventure, represented in the hidden mental processes of the characters. Questions to ask about the intentions of the characters include: *'What does x believe...?' 'What does x want?' 'What does x think or feel..?' 'What does x want others to think...?' 'What reasons would x give?' 'What does x think that y should do ...?' 'Why does x think that...?' 'What does x hope will happen...?'*

### 4. *Meanings*

A successful story is a whole, it has coherence, and like any construct can be studied as a whole. In every story there are challenges to our understanding of the whole or of parts. Elements or words that are strange or puzzling. Questions to ask about the meaning include: *'What does this story tell us...?' 'What is the moral of the story?' 'Can you think of a/another title to the story?' 'What would you say the story was about?' 'Is there anything puzzling about the story?' 'What does the author/story not tell us?' 'In what ways is it like/unlike other stories?'*

### 5. *The telling*

Another element of narrative analysis is its mode of telling. A genre is not only a form of plot, but is also a style of telling. There are only a basic number of plots, but infinite ways in which they can be told. Questions to ask about the telling include: *'Was there anything special about the story?' 'Was it a well-told story?' 'Are there other stories like this?' 'What kind of story is it?' 'Who do you think wrote/told it first?' 'Where does the story come from?' 'What was different about this story?' 'Could you tell this story in a different way?' 'Could you change the characters or events?' 'If the story was told differently would it be the same story?'*

(from the Introduction to 'Stories for Thinking' by Robert Fisher)

## The Monkey and her Baby

One day the king of the gods decided to find out which of the animals had the most beautiful baby. So he asked every kind of animal to come and show him their baby. He said he would give the animal with the most beautiful baby a big prize.

All the animals said they would come, for they all wanted to win the prize for having the most beautiful baby.

The animals came in a long line, each with a baby to show the king. There was a cow and her calf, a dog and her puppy, a cat and her kitten, a sheep with her little lamb, a lion and her cub, a goat and her kid - in fact all the animals you can think of, with their babies.

They all passed in front of the king. He looked carefully at each baby to see which was the most beautiful. All the animals wondered which baby the king would choose to win the prize.

Having seen all the animals in the big parade, the king of the gods was just about to say who the winner was when a monkey came running in carrying her baby. She thrust her baby into the king's arms.

The king stared down at the little creature with its wrinkled face and screwed-up eyes. 'What ever is this?' asked the king.

The king thought it was the ugliest thing he had ever seen. He held the baby well away from himself and stared at it. 'Take it away!' he said. 'It is the ugliest baby I have ever seen!'

All the other animals began to laugh.

The mother monkey took her baby and cuddled it in her arms. 'I don't care what you say,' she said. 'You can give the prize to whoever you like. I know that my baby is the most beautiful baby of all!'

Monkeys, like all mothers, think that their own child is the best.

(African folktale)

## The Monkey and her Baby: discussion plans

### Thinking about the story

*Key question: What does the story mean?*

- 1 Why did the animals come to see the king of the gods?
- 2 What animals came to see the king?
- 3 Which is your favourite baby animal? Why is it your favourite?
- 4 Which animal was the last to come in?
- 5 What did the king think of the baby monkey?
- 6 Why did he think this? Do you agree?
- 7 What did the mother monkey think of her baby?
- 8 Why did she think this?
- 9 Do you think all mothers their babies are the best? Why is this?
- 10 Do you think babies are beautiful? Can you say why?

### Thinking about beauty

*Key question: What is beautiful?*

- 1 What do we mean when we say something is beautiful?
- 2 Can you think of something that is beautiful to look at?
- 3 What (or what else) is something beautiful to look at? Why is it beautiful?
- 4 Does everyone agree about what things are beautiful? Why?
- 5 Can things you hear be beautiful? Can you give an example?
- 6 Can a smell be beautiful? What smells are beautiful?
- 7 Can something be a beautiful taste? What do you think tastes beautiful?
- 8 Can something be beautiful to touch? What is beautiful to touch?
- 9 Do you ever have a beautiful feeling?
- 10 What is a beautiful person? Do you know someone who is beautiful?

This excerpt of discussion of the story *The Monkey and her Baby* (Fisher 1999) with 6/7 year olds shows the teacher trying to move the children's thinking on through a Socratic questioning:

- Teacher: Why did the mother think that her baby was best?  
Child: Because it was beautiful. She thought it was beautiful.  
Child: She thought it was beautiful because she was the mother.  
Teacher: What does it mean to be beautiful?  
Child: It means someone thinks you are lovely.  
Child: You are perfect ...  
Child: Good to look at.  
Teacher: Can you be beautiful even if no-one thinks you are lovely?  
Child: No. You can't be beautiful if no-one thinks you are beautiful.  
Child: You can be beautiful inside, you can *feel* beautiful ...

The reference for this story is: Fisher R. (1999), *'First Stories for Thinking'*, Oxford: Nash Pollock p22-3.

## The Bear that Spoke

One day in the cold lands of Canada two friends went out hunting. They were tracking a moose through the great pinewood forests. Snow carpeted the ground and as they trod through it they heard no sound. They did not suspect that as they followed the track of the moose there were two eyes watching them.

The two hunters stopped, hoping to spot the flash of antlers through the trees. Behind them a dark shadow moved across the snow. Closer and closer it came. One of the hunters glanced round. 'It's a bear!' he shouted.

The huge grizzly bear, a mass of brown fur and claws, was almost upon them. Without a second's thought the two men ran. They knew that their only hope was to find a place of refuge. One of them pointed to a nearby pine tree, and ran towards it. As soon as he reached it he began to climb faster than he had ever climbed before. His friend however tripped over a root in the snow. He fell with a crash into the snow.

'Help! I think I've sprained my ankle!' he shouted.

The man in the tree looked round. He could see that the bear was still some way off. But what could he do? What should he do? He decided to carry on climbing.

The man on the ground lay quite still and held his breath. The nerves in his body tingled with fear as he could hear the 'scrunch, scrunch' of paws on snow coming nearer and nearer. The bear lumbered up to him, and began snuffle suspiciously round his head. The man could feel the bear's hot breath on his face. He didn't move a muscle. The bear's claws scratched at the snow. Then there was a soft padding sound as the bear ambled slowly away.

'He's left me alone,' thought the man. 'he must have thought I was dead.'

At once he felt a surge of pain in his sprained ankle.

High in the tree his friend saw the bear disappear into the bushes. He waited a few minutes until he was sure it was quite safe, then carefully climbed down. He ran quickly to his friend who was still lying flat in the snow. He helped the man sit up, and soon had helped him to bandage up his ankle.

Seeing his friend was none the worse for his meeting with the bear, the hunter who had climbed the tree said, 'I knew you'd be all right. I guess you were safer down there than I was up that tree.' Trying to cheer his friend, who still looked hurt, he added, 'Hey, that bear was so close he seemed to be whispering something in your ear. Come on, tell me, did he say something to you?'

'Well' the other replied, 'what the bear said was I should never trust a friend who deserts you when things get difficult.'

*(Canadian folktale, a variation of one of Aesop's fables)*

## **The Bear that Spoke: discussion plans**

### **Thinking about the story**

*Key question: What does the story mean?*

1. What were the friends hunting? Where were they hunting? What was it like there?
2. Why had they gone out hunting? What reasons might they have had?
3. Why were they so scared of the bear? Were they right to feel scared?
4. What happened when they saw the bear? What might have happened next?
5. Do you think the man in the tree should have left the man who had fallen in the snow?
6. What could the man in the tree have done? What should he have done? What would you have done?
7. Why did the bear come close to the man and sniff him?
8. Why did the man say the bear had whispered something to him?
9. Can animals speak, or communicate in any way, with other animals or humans?
10. This story is based on one of Aesop's fables. What do you think the moral of the story should be?

### **Thinking about friendship**

*Key question : What is a friend?*

1. What is a friend? Can you give a definition?
2. Can you be a friend to someone you do not like?
3. Can you be a friend to someone you hardly talk to?
4. Can people fight and still be friends? Can people never fight and be friends?
5. Can someone have no friends? What would it be like to have no friends?
6. Can everybody be a friend? Could you be friends with everyone?
7. What makes a friend a special person? Is it someone with whom you are always honest?
8. Who are your friends - classmates, animals, teachers, your neighbours, your family?
9. Are the friends of a friend always your friend?
10. How do you make friends?

The reference for this story is: Fisher R. (1996), *'Stories for Thinking'*, Oxford: Nash Pollock, p50-51

## **The Willow Pattern story**

*This is a version of the story shown on traditional blue-and-white Willow Pattern plates.*

Long ago in ancient China there lived a girl called Koong See, daughter of a wealthy nobleman or mandarin. They lived in a house by a river with a beautiful garden. The garden contained many beautiful trees, but the one Koong See liked best was the willow tree which shaded the bridge by the river. Koong See often felt lonely and would sit sewing silk embroidery under the tree.

The mandarin had a secretary named Chang who helped him in his office. One day the mandarin went off on a trip to the city, leaving Chang to guard his house. This was rather a dull job, so Chang decided to go for a walk in the garden and there under the willow tree he met Koong See. From that day on they met secretly every evening under the tree and fell in love.

One evening after his return the mandarin decided to go for a walk in his garden. There to his horror he saw the lovers under the willow tree. In a rage he banished Chang, and built a high wall round his garden. The mandarin decided he would find a rich husband for his daughter. Koong See locked in the garden behind a high wall looked at the swallows building their nests and longed to fly away. But how could she escape?

The mandarin found a rich old man called Ta-jin willing to marry Koong See. He locked his daughter in a tower by the river's edge, and said she would be married to Ta-jin when the peach tree bloomed in the spring.

One day Koong See saw a coconut shell floating downstream in the water. She reached for the shell and inside found a message from Chang saying that he would rescue her. She wrote a reply which said - 'I wish I could fly away with you,' and placed it in the shell as it floated away.

The day of the marriage came and Koong See saw Ta-jin for the first time. He was rich, but he was ugly! The mandarin had with him a box of jewels ready to give to Ta-jin as a wedding present. Koong See was allowed to take one thing with her to her new home, and chose her stick for spinning silk. As the marriage was about to take place a servant leaped forward and grabbed Koong See's hand. It was Chang in disguise. He grabbed the jewel box, and with Koong See ran out of the house, through the garden and over the bridge to freedom. The mandarin followed with a whip (this is the picture usually shown on the plate) but could not catch them.

The couple sailed to an island where they thought they would be safe, and married. But Ta-jin sent soldiers to search for them, and eventually they came to the island. Chang and Koong See saw the soldiers coming, and hid in their house behind locked doors. The soldiers knocked, then tried to force open the door, but failed. 'Burn the house down!' ordered Ta-jin.

The soldiers set light to the house. As the house blazed the gods looked down and took pity on Chang and Koong See. The house and all in it burnt to the ground, but out of the smoke flew two birds. The lovers had been turned into doves so that they could be together forever.

## Books on teaching thinking, learning and creativity by Robert Fisher

**Stories for Thinking** (1996) Nash Pollock ISBN 1898255091 £13.99

Stories for ages 7-14, introducing ways to develop thinking, discussion and literacy skills with individuals, groups, or classes. 'Results have been extremely successful' (teacher)

**Poems for Thinking** (1997) Nash Pollock ISBN1898255156 £13.99

Poems from various cultures for ages 7-16 showing how poetry can stimulate thinking, discussion and literacy skills. 'The first poetry lessons I have enjoyed' (child)

**Games for Thinking** (1997) Nash Pollock ISBN 189825513X £13.99

Over 100 thinking games for ages 7 to adult. Easy-to-play games to promote thinking and learning, with discussion plans and thinking activities. 'A wonderful resource' (teacher)

**First Stories for Thinking** (1999) Nash Pollock ISBN1898255296 £13.99

Thirty stories for ages 4-8, with discussion plans to develop thinking, discussion and literacy skills, for use in home, school or literacy hour. 'Excellent' (teacher)

**Head Start: How to Develop Your Child's Mind** (1999) Souvenir Press £10.99

ISBN 0285634933 How to develop your childrens' multiple intelligences.

'Offers much of value to teachers and parents to excite imagination and motivation'

**First Poems for Thinking** (2000) Nash Pollock ISBN189825530X £13.99

Thirty poems for ages 4-8, with discussion plans to develop thinking and literacy, for use in home or school. 'Really gets children thinking about poetry' (teacher)

**Values for Thinking** (2001) Nash Pollock ISBN1898255377 £13.99

A guide to using stories, pictures and popular culture for discussing moral and social values with many practical ideas for citizenship education. 'Excellent resource' primary teacher

**Teaching Thinking: Philosophical Enquiry in the Classroom** (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) (2003) Continuum £16.99 ISBN 030470065 Shows how to develop thinking, learning and moral values through philosophical discussion. 'The best introduction to philosophy for children' (teacher)

**Unlocking Creativity** (2004) ed. Fisher R. & Williams M. David Fulton ISBN 1843120925 £17.00. A guide on developing creativity across the curriculum (from 5-14 yrs).

**Teaching Children to Think** (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) (2005) Nelson Thornes ISBN 0748722351 £17.00

This book is an introduction to teaching thinking and shows how thinking skills can enrich every area of the curriculum. 'Highly recommended', 'an inspiring book', 'full of rich ideas'

**Teaching Children to Learn** (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) (2005) Nelson Thornes ISBN 074872091X £17.00

This is a practical guide to ten powerful teaching strategies for active learning.

'A really practical book' (teacher). 'Full of thoughtful guidelines' (lecturer)

**Unlocking Literacy** (2<sup>nd</sup> ed)(2006) ed. Fisher R. & Williams M. David Fulton ISBN

1853466522 £17.00 A guide for teachers on creative ideas for teaching literacy.

**Starters for Thinking** (2006) Nash Pollock ISBN1898255482 £13.99

More than 500 starters for thinking – enjoyable, open-ended thinking challenges for 7yrs-adult. Ideal starting points for creativity and thinking. 'A fund of inspiring ideas' (teacher)

Order these books from publishers, booksellers or online via [www.teachingthinking.net](http://www.teachingthinking.net)

