

STORYTELLING AND THINKING SKILLS AND USING STORIES IN THE CLASSROOM

A REPORT OF THE MASTERCLASS DELIVERED BY
PROFESSOR ROBERT FISHER ON FEBRUARY 6TH AND
7TH

This is a report on the first Master Class in the Teachers Telling Tales programme. It is intended as an aide to those who attended the class.

(The titles correspond, roughly, to the slides used in the lecture and I have attempted to report the discussions.)

SESSION 1

WHAT IS A STORY?

The imagination, the ability to create stories, is what separates us from the rest of the animal world.

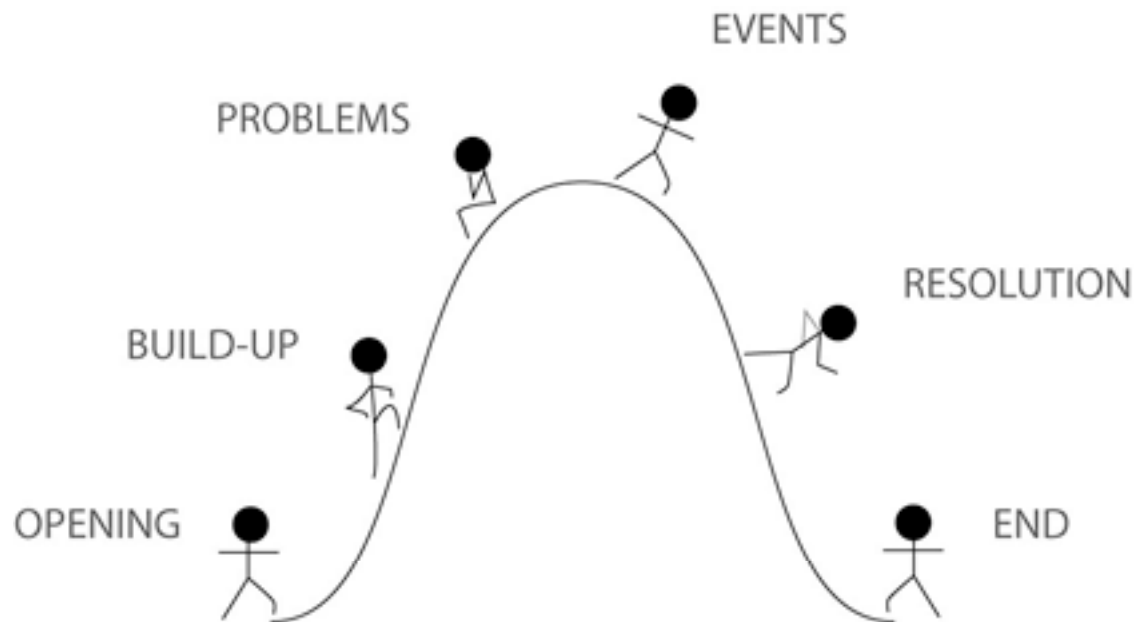
Story is the capacity to create worlds in our own minds. These worlds may exist:

- In the past
- In the present
- In the future

And so we can travel in our own minds, wherever we want to go.

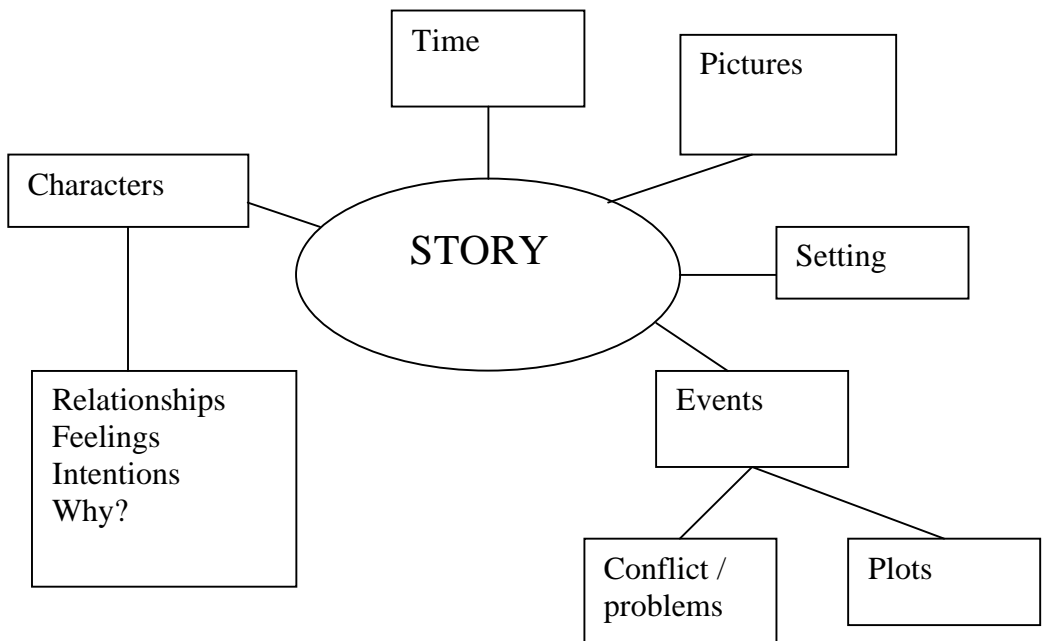
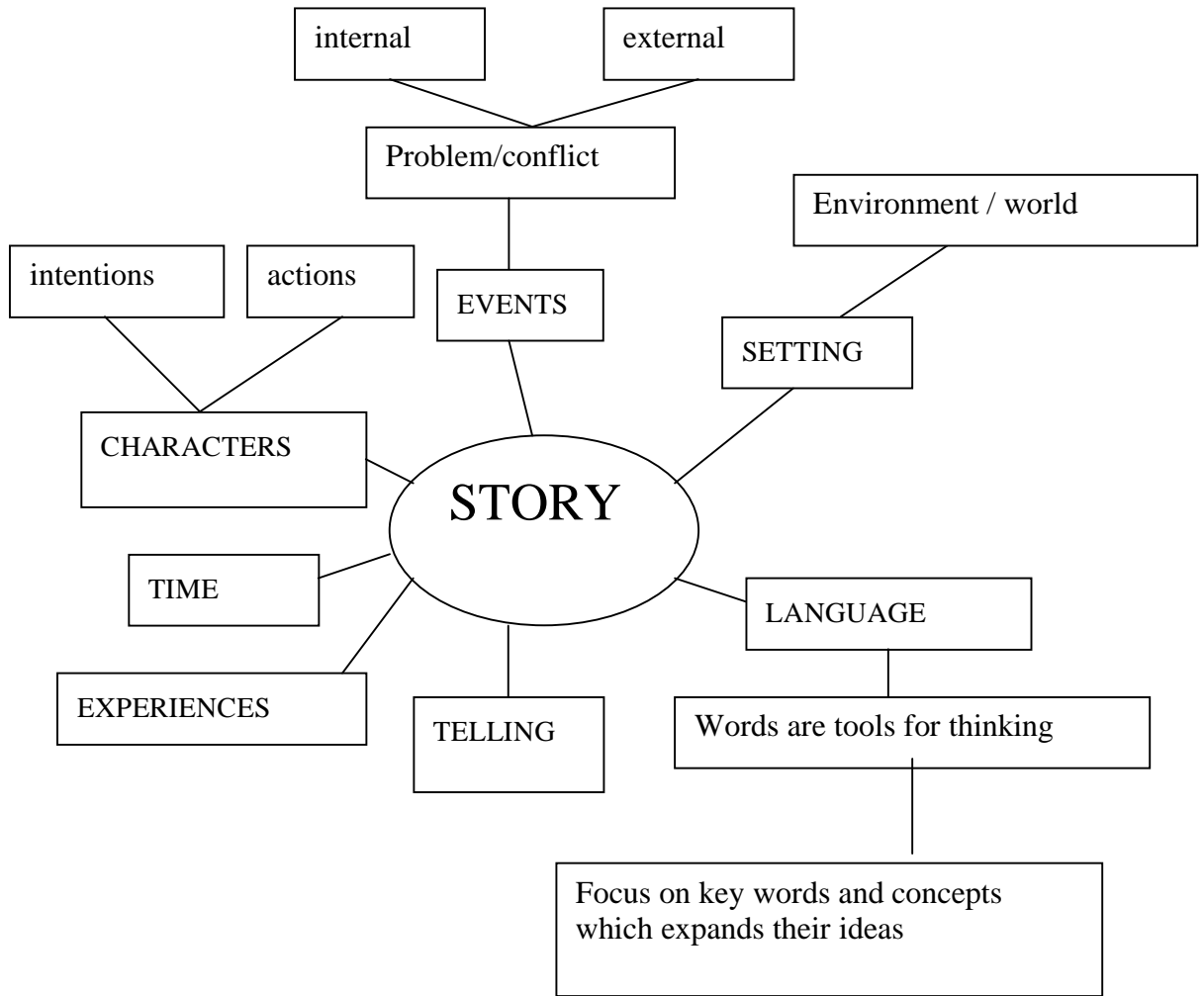
THE ANATOMY OF A STORY

A story consists of an opening; a build-up; problems and/or events; resolution; end



Mind map of a story

At this point Professor Fisher drew the word Story in the centre of a flip chart and invited the teachers to suggest elements of a story, or questions we should ask about a story. Here are the results, from the February 6th session first, and then the following session.



Characters are really humans, though they can take the forms of animals, robots etc.

We are story detectives, trying to find out more about what happens.

Children need to be able to interrogate pictures as well as words, although Professor Fisher tends to use books without pictures in order to get children to visualise it for themselves.

Learning to think; thinking to learn

***‘Thinking has to be learned the way dancing has to be learned’
Nietzsche***

Professor Fisher invited suggestions as to how thinking could be like dancing:

- The brain is like a muscle: it needs to work in order to develop
- You need to *do* both: the more you do it, the more skilled you become
- They must be taught
- You need to practise
- It is more pleasurable to do it with others
- Both have patterns: continuing, never-ending, repeating, variations
- The patterns and sequences must be taught and learned
- You can follow an established pattern or you can create your own
- If you do it with a partner or in a group you will extend and enhance your capacity
- There are different styles of both dancing and thinking (visual, audio, kinaesthetic cognitive styles)

THINKING SKILLS: BLOOM’S TAXONOMY

Bloom’s cognitive goals:

Information processing – knowledge

Enquiry – comprehension; application

Reasons – analysis

Creative thinking – synthesis

Evaluation - evaluation

How does this translate in a classroom story session?

- Information processing** - know things: 'Tell me what happened'
Literal, facts, first level:
'Who remembers what happens?'
- Enquiry** - researches into different words and worlds;
Key questions: 'What is a stepmother?'; 'Are there really wolves in the forest?'
- Reasons** - Why things happen: 'Why are they....?'; 'Why not different?'; 'Why does this happen?'; 'Why do you think that...'
- Creative Thinking** - 'What else is there that the story doesn't tell us?';
'How can we change this?'; 'Is this better or worse?';
new connections; new ideas
- Evaluation** - judgement; review; decision-making: 'Was it good?'; 'Could it have been better?'; 'Was she right to do...?'

5 THINGS THE BRAIN NEEDS TO SURVIVE:

Rest - so connections can be strengthened sub-consciously and rearranged
Food;
Water;
Oxygen;
Stimulus – the lack of this can cause retardation

WHAT LIMITS HUMAN THINKING?

What do you think limits the children's ability to think in the classroom?

- Others doing your thinking for you (other students, or ourselves as teachers) or blocking you off
- It's risky; you expose yourself to scorn or ridicule
- Time – we must build in thinking time for those who are slower at cognitive processing; *also*, thinking time for teachers, to ponder responses.

- Stimulus – the lack of it leads to boredom; we must create stimulus through questioning
- Lack of experience – story gives children more experience in the world and in their inner world; we must find stories which build on their experience

WHAT LIMITS HUMAN THINKING? (2)

Research into autism suggests that human thinking can be limited by:

Lack of central coherence (Harper 1999) – what is the objective; what is the point; is there a purpose here?

Inflexibility of thought (Frith 1989) - we need new ways of thinking; new challenges; new possibilities

Mindblindness (Baron-Cohen 1995) – where we do not understand other people's feelings and thoughts; there is no empathy, which is essential for the development of emotional intelligence

HABITS OF INTELLIGENT BEHAVIOR

Habits of intelligent behaviour include being:

Curious – asking questions
 Collaborative – learning from others
 Critical – giving reasons
 Creative – thinking new ideas
 Caring – relating to others

DEFENSIVE TEACHING

What kind of teaching should be avoided? Professor Fisher asked for suggestions, and the teachers came up with:

- Focusing on behaviour instead of learning
- Ignoring students
- Individual work with low demands
- Encouraging students to be passive
- Limiting the scope of the teaching
- Controlling knowledge

As he remarked, every teacher has to use some of these techniques a lot of the time, given class sizes, curriculum demands and so on. However, we should aim for at least one lesson a day where we do not fall back on these.

USING QUESTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

How many questions do you think teachers ask, on average, in a day? Research (in the U.S.) suggests that the figure is around 300. Three hundred questions a day and most of them are

Closed – factual, literal, managerial, only one possible right answer

As opposed to

Open - no specific answer; can be:

- Empirical, scientific, factual, questions about the world
- Conceptual, about ideas
- Values, is it true, is it right?

OPEN QUESTIONS: WHAT IF?

What if? questions are a great way to get children thinking. Some ideas for questions to use are;

What if....

Animals could talk?

Plants could walk?

We could live forever?

You could run the school?

Get children to create their own 'what if?' questions.

WOULD YOU RATHER BE A BIRD OR A BUTTERFLY?

Professor Fisher asked everyone to think about this question for a few moments and to decide which they would like to be; then they were to turn to the person next to them and discuss their choice and the reasons for it; then everyone was invited to share with the whole group.

This is a technique Professor Fisher referred to as 'Think, Pair, Share'. He uses it frequently in his classroom, and made use of it quite a lot in the Master Class.

Sample exchange:

'I'd rather be a bird because they live longer'

'So you think the *length* of your life is the most important thing?'
'I'd like to be a butterfly because they are beautiful'
'So beauty is the most important thing to you?'

And so on. In both classes there were very few butterflies, but Professor Fisher had an example of a 7-year old girl's answer, where she gave nine reasons why she would prefer to be a butterfly.

The point here is to get the children thinking about why they have made their decision, to give reasons – the actual question is immaterial.

SOCRATIC QUESTIONS

Socratic questions are:

- Open
- Challenging
- Progressive, from concrete to abstract

Literal → Critical → Conceptual

WHAT ARE PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS?

- Logic
- Ethics
- Metamorphosis
- Epistemology
- Aesthetics

(Cartoon)

CURIOSITY: ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO QUESTION

***I kept six honest serving men
They taught me all I know
Their names are what and why and when
And how and where and who
Kipling***

This is a useful quote to display in the classroom, as it encourages children to question. How else might this be achieved? Suggestions were:

- Keep a book where children can write in questions about anything. Then have a weekly session where the book can be read together and the questions discussed;
- Display prompts on the walls;
- Show pictures and ask the children what they think is happening etc.

SESSION 2: A COMMUNITY OF ENQUIRY

STORY FOR THINKING

The following story is from Professor Fisher's handout. The teachers are asked to read it and think about what questions they have about the story. Then, again, 'Think, Pair, Share'.

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 questions which came out of the two Classes were:

- Who is this king of the gods?
- What gave him the power to decide?
- Why did he decide to give a prize?
- Why doesn't he already know, if he is the king of the gods?
- Why does he want to do this?
- What is beauty?
- What is ugliness?
- What are the criteria for deciding?
- Where was the monkey before?
- Why did the king laugh?
- Why did he say that to the monkey?
- What was the prize?

These are all questions that any class might come up with, and you can use any of them to probe further. For example:

Who is this king of the gods? What are gods? Are they the same as God?
What is a king? What do you think he would look like?

What was the prize? Every story has information that is not revealed and must be discovered. What do you think the prize could be? Is that a good prize? What would you give if you were the king?

Why did the king laugh? Why do people laugh? Are there different kinds of laughter? Was the king being unkind? Why do you think he did that? Was he right?

Additional material on the story can be found on the handout, '*Stories for Thinking*', which is available on the Master Class resources site.

Professor Fisher notes that this story is an African folktale; he often uses folktales, myths and legends because they contain what Kieran Egan calls *binary opposites* – key concepts that structure human feelings and tap into core principles.

Any story can be used but, although it need not be long, it must have some complexity, some depth.

A COMMUNITY OF ENQUIRY

A community of enquiry in the classroom in an environment in which we can take an element of a story and

Enrich it, thus implementing the new curriculum, and
Engage the children, and
Extend thinking skills.

USING PICTURES

You can use a picture to encourage thinking. Select a picture – again, some complexity is desirable – and put it up in the classroom where the children can look at it at any time. This can provide one session on thinking skills, one week or even a term project.

Using pictures develops visual, as well as verbal, thinking and intelligence. You can use all sorts of visual material to create stories, and can choose images that tie in with other class projects, such as citizenship.

CREATING A COMMUNITY OF ENQUIRY

The term 'community of enquiry' comes from the philosophy for children's charity Sapere, which aims to promote philosophical enquiry as an important dimension of school and college curriculum development and to raise levels of

educational achievement through philosophical enquiry. It is worth checking out its website sapere.co.uk

WHY PHILOSOPHY WITH CHILDREN?

What are the advantages of teaching philosophy to children? Professor Fisher gave some answers from children he has worked with:

'Philosophy makes you ask questions.'

'Philosophy gives you the confidence to think and speak for yourself.'

'Philosophy helps me to give reasons and explain what I mean.'

We want to get the children to ask questions about what they are studying.

Why do children ask fewer and fewer questions as they get older? Suggestions:

They are not encouraged

The environment is too controlled

Time constraints

The size of the curriculum – although the new one will be better

Size of the class

Sometimes the children are stifled at home, so they lose the habit

WORDS ARE THE TOOLS FOR THINKING

Real concepts are impossible without words and thinking in concepts does not exist beyond verbal thinking. That is why the central moment in concept formation, and its general cause, is a specific use of words as functional tools.

Vygotsky

That is, the child does not learn to think until he has words with which to express those thoughts; thoughts are not merely expressed in words, they come into existence through them.

KINDS OF TALK

What are the differences between these kinds of talking? Think, Pair, Share.

Telling

Conversation

Discussion

Dialogue

Telling - monologue; one person talking

Conversation – informal; between two or more people; no set agenda; no reason for it; could contain monologue(s) within it; no conclusion

Discussion – an exchange of views on a particular subject; there is an agenda; no set outcome, necessarily; could be exploratory

Dialogue – two people engaged in a purposeful discussion; there is a focus; it is 'about something'; interaction

During discussive teaching we should seek to have various focused dialogues with different students.

DIALOGIC TEACHING

Children need dialogue with different voices, ideas and views. They need to learn the importance of three questions:

- What do I say?
- What do you say?
- What do other people say?

'A good teacher makes what you think matter.'

Joel, aged 8

At this point, Professor Fisher got the teachers to play a game. One person says a word; the next person says another word connected with the first, and so on round. If you can't think of a word you can pass, and if you think there is no connection between two words you can challenge the person to justify their choice. After a few rounds of that (and much laughing) the rules were changed so that there must be no connection between the words.

After, they were asked 'what were the rules of the game?'

- You must listen
- You must take turns
- Only one person can speak at a time
- You must think about what the last person said
- You don't have to speak if you don't want to (thus modelling democracy: you have the right to speak but you don't have to speak *as long as you are participating*)
- You can challenge other people
- You can agree or disagree as long as you give your reasons and say why

Then Professor Fisher put up an example of rules that a Year 5 class had compiled for the same game. They were very similar, except for a warning that there should be 'no put-downs' – a possibility that obviously didn't occur to the teachers.

It is always good to let the children formulate their own rules in their own words. This will make them think about what is necessary and will give them ownership of the rules.

A good strategy tip is to put the worst-behaved child in charge of enforcing the rules: they are invariably strict.

A community of enquiry is identified by its rules.

COLLABORATING

1. establish the rules for discussion
2. discuss 'talking' words
3. identify the thinking objectives of the discussion

Examples of thinking objectives could be:

- Giving reasons
- Getting questions
- Engaging everyone

MODELS OF THINKING AND LEARNING

'Learning involves conscious reflective control and deliberate mastery'
Vygotsky

A community of enquiry provides a mode, or framework, planned to provide

- Serious
- Sustained
- Systematic

Discussions of matters of importance.

COMMUNITY OF ENQUIRY

Moral model → community → democracy:
What do I think? What do others think?

Rational model → critical enquiry → truth
Is it true? What are the reasons? What is the evidence?

Creative model → **imagination** → **creativity**
What new ideas? What alternatives?

Evaluative model → **judgement** → **evaluation**
How do we judge this? What criteria do we use?

COMMUNITY OF ENQUIRY IN THE CLASSROOM

1. Community setting – a horseshoe or a circle is the most effective forum. Why do think that is?

- the children can all see each other;
- it is inclusive;
- you can look at the person speaking
- it's easier to take turns
- it's easier to share whatever may be in the middle
- it models equality of opportunity

2. Focusing activity – a starter, a game, a meditation.

Meditation is good because it gives silence (a rare thing in the classroom) and trains the children to focus, to take control of themselves. Never forget that we are sowing the seeds of the future here, thinking not only of short-term goals but also of long-term skills.

3. Shared stimulus –a story, a picture, whatever you chose.

4. Questioning – get the kids to ask questions and pick out interesting points in order to set the agenda for

5. Discussion

6. Review

To illustrate, we will create a community of enquiry here. The shared stimulus is the next story on the handout, (as before) 'the Bear that Spoke'.

The teachers read the story out, one sentence each, and are asked to pick out anything interesting, strange Professor Fisher or puzzling about which they would like to ask a question. Then 'Think, Pair, Share' again.

This time, when Professor Fisher writes the suggested questions on the board he numbers them and notes who asked the question.

The teachers are asked to vote on which question they think most interesting. Once it has been picked, the questioner is asked 'why?' and the discussion carries on from there:

Why did you ask that? What are your own thoughts on that? Who agrees/ disagrees? Why? What sort of a question is this? Would you...? Could you....? Should you...?

And so on. At the end, the original questioner is asked whether the question has been answered, and (of course) why/ why not?

The discussion should be mapped, either at the time or afterwards. You can, and should, guide the discussion where necessary. Where questions are too literal try to push them to the conceptual level. For instance, 'what were they hunting?' →'is it right to hunt animals? What do you think?' the challenge is to turn a simple question into something more complex which can sustain and develop the discussion.

There are questions on this story in the handout, which can be useful when you want to explore specific areas or concepts, but these or any pre-prepared questions are never as important as those the children come up with themselves.

CREATIVE THINKING

The criteria for creative thinking are:

- Fluency
- Flexibility
- Originality
- Elaboration
- Judgement

LEADING A GOOD DISCUSSION

Leading a good discussion is a complex skill characterised by:

- Open, or Socratic, questions
- Lengthy pupil responses
- Reference to big concepts
- Connections to life; real contexts

Usually you should set aside an hour or so for the session, and have open questions ready to feed into the discussion if necessary.

USING VIDEO

It can be a good idea to video a discussion and show it to the class. It can spark off further analysis of the subject: 'Did you mean to say this?' 'Do you want to say more?' Professor Fisher recalled an incident where he missed something important a child had said at the time but picked it up later in the video.

PACE

Teaching is not about pace per se, but about cognitive pace. Every child – indeed every person – has a different cognitive pace, and a good teacher will be aware of this. The point of getting the children to think and question is to reach deeper levels.

How long do teachers wait for an answer? Research has shown that the average time is 1 -5 seconds.

What happens if you slow down? Children give longer answers, think more, ask questions themselves.

How long do you think about what the children say? Good thoughts can take time to develop.

We need to spend more time on things and on projects; we need to wait longer for answers.

SESSION 3: EXTENDING AN ENQUIRY

Now we will examine ways of extending an enquiry. For this you need to do 3 things

- Look at a story

- See how it might be extended

- Share one idea for going from storytelling to story writing

THE WILLOW PATTERN STORY

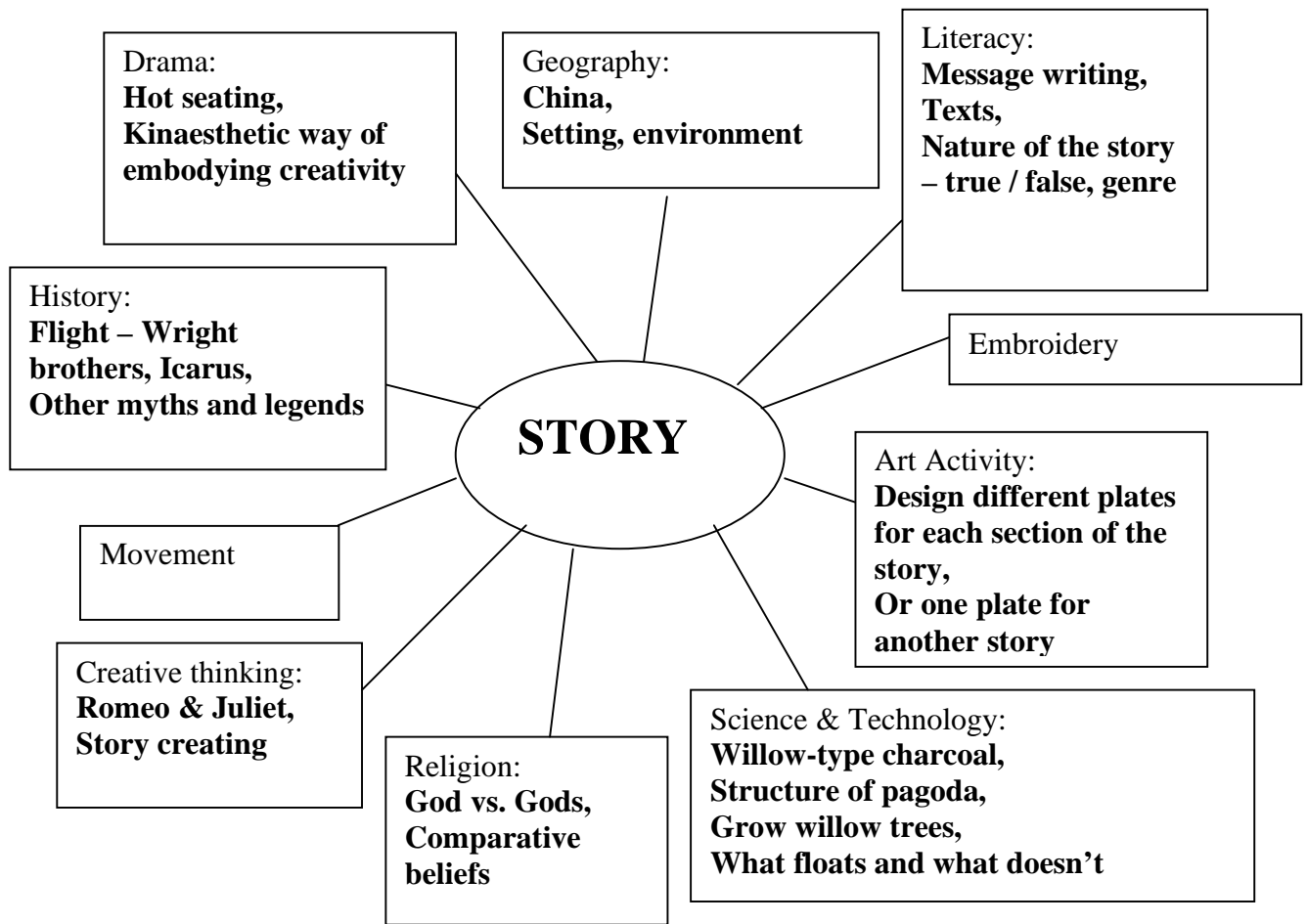
Professor Fisher shows a slide of a Willow Pattern Plate – you could use an actual plate in class. Then the teachers read the story (from the handout) as before or he tells the story and the session proceeds as in creating a community of enquiry, above: ‘Think, Pair, Share’; write questions and names on board.

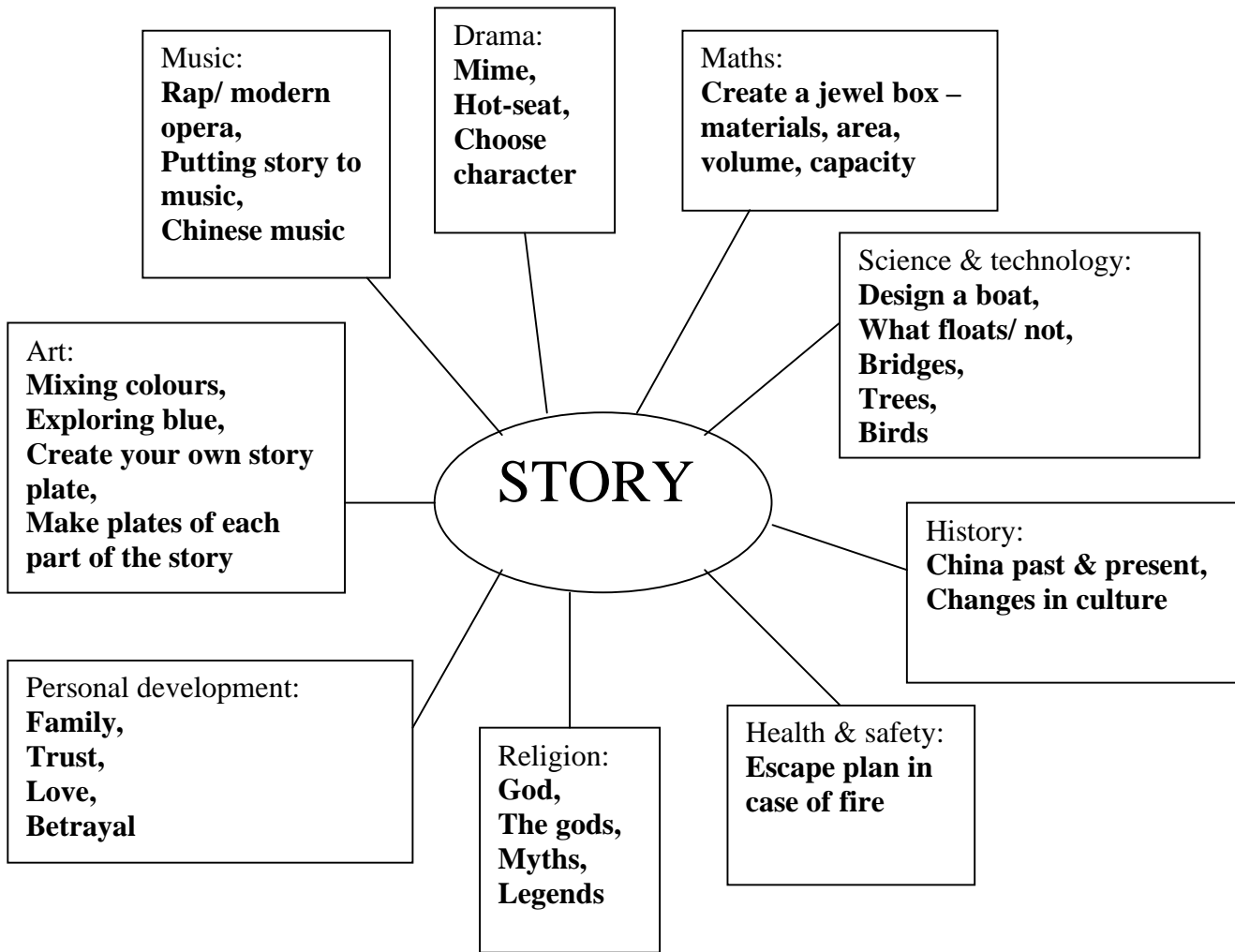
At this point you can proceed as before – voting on questions, discussing and so on – or give individual questions to groups or pairs for discussion.

TO EXTEND AND ENRICH THE CURRICULUM

Enriching the curriculum is all about making connections. What links would you make to extend this to another area and other activities? Take a few minutes in pairs and discuss/ brainstorm/ mind map/ whatever, and then share at least one idea.

Here are the suggestions from both classes.





STORY MAKING: USING PICTURES TO CREATE STORIES

Professor Fisher gives out envelopes containing pictures to the teachers; long envelopes contain the picture of a character and short ones that of a setting and each pair gets one of each.

They may not show their partners the pictures immediately. Instead, they must take it turns to describe their picture and answer questions about it. In this way, a character and an environment, of depth and complexity, are created out of the two pictures. Now each pair creates an event or events around these, and the stories thus written are shared with the group.

THOUGHTS AND COMMENTS ON THE DAY

Professor Fisher asked the teachers to think about the work done that day. What was important about it? What was problematical?

- It gets children communicating, gives them a voice, and that's important.
- It will empower the children and raise their self-esteem.
- It has given me more and better uses for stories, such as using them to develop emotional maturity
- I must teach the children independent thinking skills: too many problems are caused by the unquestioning acceptance of dogma.
- There are no right answers, just the right questions.
- It will give children self-confidence and flexibility
- This is a way of developing new practice.
- It's about creating a supportive environment in which to take risks with imagination.
- Encouraging children to participate and to think; making them see there are no wrong answers.
- It's made me aware not to take things at face value, to think outside the box.
- The most important things are to verbalise thinking, and to give the children time for reflection.
- This has made me more aware of the types of questions to ask, and that all answers are valuable.
- It's made me think about the different points of view we have as adults and children, and realise that we must hear the children's voices.
- I'm thankful that *I'm* being helped today: you need to have confidence in yourself as a teacher before you can help the children. This has been a tremendous insight on what you can do with a story.
- When I get back to class, I need to stop talking so much.
- It's made me reflect on a strategy to empower children.
- I need to encourage the children to ask their own question.
- This is life-long learning: we are still learning how to enrich and enhance our teaching, although there may be time constraints. I loved the question box idea – something we can explore together.
- It's too easy for some children to slip out/ switch off, we must try to engage them and encourage their imagination.
- I must remember to give children the chance to think and to answer, and also to pass if they want.
- I've learned how to dig deeper into the written text; how to draw concepts out of stories.
- I liked the idea of creating stories around pictures.
- I think that this gives us an opportunity to be better teachers, but I don't know how the children will take it – it will broaden their parameters.
- I think we should involve parents in this; show them how their children are thinking.
- This has challenged the way I teach: I need to break out of the rut, to change and adapt, and so do the children.
- I need to take time to listen, time to think.
- This will help children to take ownership of their learning; it's fun and will help them become independent thinkers.

PROBLEMS:

Lack of vocabulary in children

Selling this to other teachers – they might think it a waste of time.

I can see management problems in class.

Children will need to adapt to the new style, too; it might not be easy.

LAST WORDS

In conclusion Professor Fisher tells a story that some may have heard before.

Two little girls are walking towards the hill where a wise old man lives. One of the girls says, 'I'm going to show that this old man isn't so wise after all. I've got a butterfly here in my hands and I'm going to ask him if is alive or dead. If he says "Alive", I'm going to close my hands and crush the butterfly before I open them to show it, and he will be wrong; if he says "Dead" I'll just open them. He'll be wrong either way, and we'll see that he's not so wise after all.'

They get to the old man and ask the question. The wise old man thinks for a long time, and then he says, '*It's up to you.*'