

Choosing Story Teaching Methods

By Barry McWilliams

NARRATION: Narration is best when the stories are simple with familiar elements

Some possible ways of presenting a story beyond just telling it include :

- **Reading a story** Children love to be read to. In preparation, read the story through several times, at least once out loud. When reading to the children be just as lively as when telling a story, and read it slowly with lots of eye contact. Reading out loud to children is excellent practice for beginning storytellers.
- **"Let's pretend"** Especially good for exploring different consequences.
- **Sharing a life experience from your life**, preferably not one that holds you up as a "good" example.
- **Discussion and/or Question and Answer.** Better with older children. Remember a Bible Story should not be a lecture.

PARTICIPATION: To get children more actively involved with the story or to fix certain elements of it in their minds. Participation may be verbal using "chants" (the children repeating after the leader); or in the children "acting out" portions of the story; or having a "conversation" with the children as you tell it.

- **The participation story.** Where a child or children are involved in it just as a magician uses someone from the audience. (Children retain 60% of what they do, 30% of what they see and only 10% of what they hear)
- **Stories with repetitive elements.** Encourage the children to join in with first a pause and eye contact in anticipation and gestures and body language of encouragement. Continue to "cue" them accordingly, building and varying the intensity and rhythm appropriately. Works Best with short simple tales and simple plots.
- **Choral, Chants and "Echo stories"** The leader provides a line or two and the children echo back words, motions, or sounds. In a Chant the children repeat back the phrases in the same rhythms in which they were cued. Or have the children make sound effects during the story when cued. It is surprising how fast things are memorized this way.
- **Pantomime** There are a number of ways this can be used. It is especially effective with smaller and younger groups where they "participate in" the story by acting it out. (Story tellers ought to cultivate an awareness of body language. And take opportunities to observe Mimes. Even when telling a story your face and gestures are very important)
- **"Acting It out":** After telling the story briefly, let the children become the characters (or props: i.e. "tree", etc.) and "act it out". Usually the children will want to take turns being certain characters. Best with younger school age children.
- **Role playing** The children take the part of the characters and face various situations in which they must respond.

VISUAL AIDS: Best when the story includes unfamiliar elements or the stories are more complicated. Sometimes a picture is worth a 1,000 words.

- **Visual aids** are especially helpful when unfamiliar objects that children would find hard to imagine are part of the story. Sometimes it is best to show the visuals before telling the story to avoid distraction during the story.
- **Pictures in sequence** help illustrate a simple story.
- **Flannel graph** stories are helpful when story sequence, movement and relationships are important in the story.
- **Stories in Sequence:** As the story progresses, use a series of pictures to illustrate the story. Bible coloring books are good resources. Timing is important. Take care the pictures aren't shown too soon, hold interest, and do not distract attention from key points.
- **Artboard stories.** The key to these is the element of suspense and surprise. "What will be added next? What will that weird squiggle turn into? Will that word be what I think it is?"

Some More possibilities:

- **Mystery pictures.** As the story progresses, a series of meaningless lines and shapes and artwork done with poster paints or chalk on newsprint "turn" into objects and words emphasizing points in the story.
- **Hidden lettering,** such as "ladder letters" can also be effective, especially if there are several points to be made.
- **Acrostic "outlines"** can be used with the lessons filling in the words as the story progresses.
- **The object lesson.** Where the teller uses objects to visually focus attention and illustrate the story. Careful preparation and practice are essential, make sure it works before you do it!
- **Other Visual aids include models, paper-folding, chalkboards, maps, etc.**

Hints:

- Keep your brushwork to a minimum, pencil in lines ahead of time, have some water to clean and moisten your brush and make sure your artwork is large enough to be seen clearly by those in the back.
- Talking and drawing at the same time is more strenuous than it appears. Know and practice your story well.
- Be careful that visual aids do not distract attention from the story. Keep interest through anticipation of what will be seen next.

CHARACTER STORIES: (Focused on the storyteller or a puppet as a character) These are best where vicarious involvement or role-playing will help deliver the point or to express inner thoughts and the thinking process.

DRAMATIC: Best for illustrating application or where multiple characters have significant roles.

Dramatic skills can never be developed too much. Practice becoming different characters and putting on different personalities. Story tellers and puppeteers ought to cultivate an awareness of body language. When telling a story your face and gestures are just as important as the tone and sound of your voice. Take opportunities to observe Mimes. Learn to exaggerate emotions. Develop various voices. Use the story telling "V" - where "you" carry on conversations with "yourself".

- The Narration story. Where the storyteller assumes the role of an eyewitness observer, perhaps even wearing an appropriate costume. Help the children "be there" with you, see it through your "eyes".
- Skits with several players. The story or an "illustration" of it is acted out. This is the most difficult, and best with large groups, and older children.
- The interview story. Where the director "interviews" the "guest" character. Especially with "silly" storytellers, it's nice to have a "straightman".

ROLEPLAYING:

Role playing is different than playing a story or dramaticizing it. In Roleplaying, children take on various roles, but the outcome of the story will depend up them, not a script. These are helpful for exploring "What if...?" situations, or for working out possible applications of a principle to real life situations. It is valuable after role playing to then explore feelings experienced and why events worked out as they did. Roleplaying allows us to redo a scene with different conditions.

PLAY ACTIVITIES: The key in using play is to get the children thinking as they are playing. Some children learn easier when involved in activities. There are all sorts of ways that play can become learning - so look for lots of different ways to connect activities into the lesson.

- **Action Stories** - Have the children join in, doing the actions along with the characters. Or have the children join in on speaking repetitive parts or lines. Or have them show the teacher how they do things.
- **Pretend.** Physical activity and some relaxation ideas can be gleaned from almost any story. Children can pretend to be objects, as well as people, such as clay in a potter's hand, seeds growing out of soil, Noah's ark floating around, etc.
- **Using Games** There are many ways you can adapt common games or game shows to lessons. Games make drilling fun instead of work. Tic Tac Toe, Stickman, Hopscotch, Concentration, etc. Games can be combined with quizzes. Game rules can be changed

PUPPETS Don't use a puppet to just narrate the story. Carry on a conversation with the puppet or have your puppets do things or they become boring. Since Puppets allow children to overhear a conversation they are especially helpful where situations need resolution or the process of working out a solution to a problem is part of the lesson. As children relate to puppets vicariously, it is good for a puppet character to be and act "childish".

- **Puppets** There are a number of types of puppets: Hand puppets with mouths; Hand puppets with arms, Hand (mouth) and rod (arms) puppets (Muppets), marionettes, etc. Simple puppets can be made from a sock, a paper bag, or simply cut out figures on popcycle sticks.
- Every puppet ought to have a clear personality, thought out in advance, and should stay in that character whether proud, grumpy, shy, nervous, etc. Each should have their own voice and stay in that too!
- In particular, watch out for
 - puppet "sink" as your arms get tired,
 - weak voice projection (especially when using a theater),
 - Out-of-sync movements or talking,
 - over elaborate dialog, props or plot, (Keep things simple).
 - Be aware of poor eye contact between the puppet and either other puppets or the audience.
 - Practice often.
- My experience is that smaller children are often frightened by puppets and must be introduced gently to them. There are a number of good books on puppetry, and plenty of opportunities to watch puppeteers at work. I found helpful *The Complete Book of Puppets and Puppeteering* by Robert Hanford. If you have the knack, then by all means develop and use it, making your own puppets, learning ventriloquism.
- Preparing for a puppet story as a skit or team-story is a bit more challenging. Many times much of the dialog in a skit can be "ad-lib". When doing this, set up the scenario beforehand so you know how the "story" will unfold. Decide on any necessary "cues". Be clear where your dialog and the story are to take you. Become the character in your mind. Create his/her personality. Think through possible turns in the dialog. Then during the story or skit speak and act "in character". Have fun and enjoy your mistakes! Usually when a team does this, one person "carries" the delivery of the point, and the other(s) "play" off of that person.

Online Help:

Puppetry Home Page

The World of Puppets

The Puppeteer's Cooperative

Kbob Puppetry Page

Puppets For Ministry

S-O-S Puppets Links

Cleaford Puppet Manual

Center for Puppetry Arts

Christian Puppet Scripts Webring

Using Flannelgraph

Flannelgraph has been used for years and is still a most versatile and effective teaching tool, if used properly and wisely. It is best used with children under 12 years old.

Flannelboard. Flannelboards can be purchased but are very easy to make. Minimum size for a children's meeting would be 27" by 36" and flannel cloths can be purchased this size. All you need to do is cut a sheet of hardboard / plywood / MDF to size and attach the flannel with bulldog clips. If you wish you could make the reverse into a chalkboard or whiteboard. If you travel to different children's meetings, a folding board would be best.

Short ends of flannelette sheeting can often be purchased quite reasonably from drapery shops and be used to make your flannelboards. Ready made flannel cloths come in a great variety of colours and scenes. A plain background is by far the simplest for beginners to use and black is hard to beat. Experienced users may wish to try different scenic backgrounds.

Small boards, to be hand held, can be used along with a larger board. They are effective for illustrating an application without removing the Bible lesson figures from the main board. In some cases, it may be impractical to have a large board on an easel. In a very small Sunday School room, or in a large room where many classes are close together, a small board could be used on the teacher's lap.

Easel. The board needs to be erected securely and a good solid easel is best.

It should be constructed in such a way that the board's height can be changed according to the teaching situation and whether you will teach standing up or sitting down. It should have a strong shelf which is large enough to hold all your flannelgraph figures. The easel should allow the flannelboard to lean back slightly. If it is too upright, the figures are more likely to fall off the cloth. If you travel about to teach, your easel should fold down for convenience.

Position. Make sure all children can see the board without discomfort. Avoid placing it in front of a window or bright light. If it is too high, the children will have sore necks looking up. If it is too low they will be unable to see past other children. Position it so you can use it most easily; some like to stand on the left, while others prefer the right. Do not stand in front of the board.

Flannelgraph figures. There is a tremendous selection of materials published for the flannelboard. Cut them out very carefully. Save the larger scrap pieces for use in making your own visuals. File the pieces carefully, taking special care of the little items. Large brown envelopes are very effective, allowing you to record details of all figures needed for that lesson. You may wish to make additional figures. e.g. word-strips. Use clear bold colours and lower case lettering. The words can be printed on heavy paper and backed with the leftover scraps you saved. It is also possible to purchase blank paper prepared for use on flannelboards, or rolls of self-adhesive flocking. A cheaper alternative is to use light card and gently sandpaper the reverse.

Placing of figures. Have your figures prepared, one on top of the other, in the order in which you will place them on the board. Put them on the shelf below your flannelboard or a table top in front of you. It is best if the children are not able to see these figures until you place them on the board. Do not hold the figure in your hand or have them stuffed into your Bible. Do not pick up a figure

until it is time for it to be placed on the board. Do not stop talking as you place the figures and do not turn your back on the children. Talk to the children, not to the flannelboard.

Be familiar with where and when you will put the figures on the board. The lesson manual should be of help with this. Practice at home first. Try practicing in front of a mirror. See what the scene looks like from the other side of the room; maybe your figures are squeezed too much together. Be aware of figures which will be needed more than once in the lesson. When you remove figures from the board at the end of one scene, have a place to put those which will not be used again. Have another place for the figure(s) which will be needed later. Get something on the board early in your lesson. If necessary, make a visual for this point. Visuals help get attention. Practice placing figures correctly. Make use of the whole board, not one small corner of it. The very centre of the board is not the most visually attractive place. Make use of the Thirds. Perspective demands that the larger figures are lower down the board than the smaller ones. Place figures so that they look natural. Do not have them leaning back or falling forward. Two characters talking to each other should have good eye contact. The feet of the characters should be on the ground; they can easily look as though they are flying! Two pictures of the same character should not appear on the board at the same time; remove the first before you place the second. If you use a scenic background, make sure it is suitable for the action of the story. You may need two or even three if the action moves from place to place. e.g. from indoors to crossing the Sea of Galilee to the Temple. It is important to have these clipped to the board, in order, and to have practised switching from one to the other. In some instances a second board or a mini-board is invaluable.

Using Flashcards

Flashcards are suitable for all types of children's meetings except those that have large numbers or in a large room. They are particularly good for open-air ministry. Always hold the book so that the pictures are level and easily seen. In a small open-air meeting, if children are sitting on the ground, it is better for you to sit or kneel in front of them. In this way they are not straining to look up at you. In some open-air meetings it is difficult to have all the children sitting in front of you. Holding the book in front of your body conveniently hides the picture on the back. Do not stand rigidly; move about a little from side to side so that all the children can clearly see the picture.

Practice turning the pages in such a way as to prevent the children seeing the next picture. Turn the pages as the story progresses, without spending too long on one page. Give them time to see and appreciate what is on the page but don't spend so long that they become bored with one picture. The picture should relate to what you are saying. If it does not, then you could set the book down or put it behind your back until it is time to come back to the visual. Remember to talk to the children, not to the visual. Eye contact is very important. Know the pictures well so that you are aware of what is coming next without having to peep at the next page.

Some flashcard lessons are visualised in such a way that all the application pictures are left to the end. Continue to teach the lesson with truth and application throughout. With some spiral-bound books, it is possible to rearrange the order of the pages to suit your lesson. It is best not to skip backwards and forwards through the book. Try some additional visual of your own, if you can. Do all you can to teach a well structured lesson despite the difficulties the visuals present.