

***Panchatantra As A Tool Of Developing Linguistic And
Social Skills In Children***

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Abstract

Children's literature is one of the major areas of literature in Modern India. The present article represents an effort to interpret Panchatantra, a classical Sanskrit book and its importance in the modern day classrooms. Historians found that in-between 300-500 BC, basically in India, stories and animal fables were narrated for educating students with special purpose of making them competent within a short period of time. The collection of these kind of moral stories is known as panchatantra. In this article, we will see some stories from Panchatantra, its content, its educational values, usefulness and adaptation of its techniques in the modern day language classrooms. The main aim of this article is to present an ancient Indian Short story book with its specialties and its tentative use in the present day education. Children usually have fascination towards short stories and when animated characters are there they enjoy it even more. Overall we will see how short stories from Panchatantra can be used not only to fine-tune the linguistic skills in children but also to fine-tune their socio-moral skills in the social group and in the community at large.

Introduction

From time immemorial human beings have always told stories. It is considered to be one of the most important things which make us who we really are and distinguishes us from other creatures on this planet. In pre-modern era before electronic equipments like television or computer came into existence, listening and telling stories was the most favorite pass time of people. Stories were used to pass on real events, history, family connections and also as an entertainment. Long before writing came into existence, the only culture majorly used was oral, spoken culture. (Fox & Jennifer 2005, 11.) That is why it is important and interesting to view modern education from the narrative perspective.

This short story collection of Bishnu Sharma, Panchatantra takes us into the deep educational history of India. When we speak about narrative learning in schools for identity construction then we cannot overlook the Vedic educational system of ancient India. In India, since the Vedic age there has been a tradition of oral education. Oral education means transferring the knowledge from one person to other through narration. Most of the ancient Indian scriptures were preserved like this, generations after generations.

In India today majority of students lack proficiency in English as it is not their first language. They need proper guidance and assistance to develop this proficiency in English. We have limited number of students who are good at this foreign language but many are not up to the mark. For a second language learner a teacher has to look into developing his all four skills like Listening, speaking, reading and writing. From these skills writing invokes the creative faculty in children. While stories often have a profound effect on us due to its emotional content, recent research also shows that our brains are actually made such to seek out a coherent narrative structure in the stories we hear and tell. This structure helps us absorb the information in a story, and connect it with our own experiences in the world. We all know that pictorial memory or listening has an added advantage, i.e. it invokes our imagination and increases our power of understanding.

History of Narration or Storytelling

Storytelling is an essential part of human nature. Man is the only creature that tells stories. Man has been telling stories and listening to them since the time he learnt to speak. The

storytelling began with oral traditions and in forms of myths, legends, fables, anecdotes, ballads etc. These were told and retold and were passed down from generation to generation and they show the knowledge and wisdom of early people. The basic theme of the stories was fears of natural forces, deeds of heroes, gods and goddesses, and they might be told to learn a lesson from an experience. Biblical stories have the primary purpose of teaching spirituality. Most biblical stories were performed in churches to convey spiritual messages to the masses. Similarly mythological stories are the treasure of every country.

The modern narratives have a broader function. After a close study of famous examples of Modern narrative, one would realize that such narratives do not merely entertain but serve as ways to communicate moral, cultural and political perspectives of the time. Moreover, narratives have contributed to achieving educational objectives in our life. Different forms of media are enabling people to express and record their real life stories and to share their knowledge and their cultural values across the world. In addition, many documentaries on television adopt a narrative technique to communicate information in an interesting way. Narratives are the central means by which people make sense of their experiences. Their functions also include presentation of autobiographical memory, socialization of children into cultural membership, and mediation of ways of thinking about problems and difficulties. These functions are crucial for adult second language learners who are looking for ways to become ‘meaningful’ in the new environment since ‘person can only be a meaningful entity, both to himself or herself and to others, by being ‘read’ in terms of the discourses available in that society” (Burr, 1995: 142). A misunderstood narrative becomes an inappropriate presentation of self – or a sequence of events – and may result in cross-miscommunication. And yet second language curriculum and classroom practices continue to privilege acquisition of linguistic, or, at best, pragmatic competence, and rarely focus on the teaching of narration. Several factors explain this oversight, including the perennial lack of time and the mistaken belief that learners who can construct ‘correct’ sentences should be able to string them together into narratives. Yet nothing could be further from the truth – learners who are very skilful at the sentence level may still fail to construct language – and culture – appropriate narratives because narrative competence is not tantamount to linguistic competence and does not fully correlate with measures of syntactic complexity or vocabulary size (McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

It remains something of a mystery why narrative text is so easy to comprehend and remember. Perhaps it is because the content of narrative text has such a close correspondence with everyday experiences. Perhaps it is because the language of oral conversation has a closer similarity to narrative text than other discourse genres. Perhaps it is because there are more vivid mental images, or a more elegant composition of the conceptual structures. Narratives are more interesting, so perhaps they are more motivating to read. (Graesser et al. 2002, 240.)

This interesting element of storytelling was used in Panchatantra to educate the students as story telling is nothing but participation, participation by the narrator and participation by the listener. It has also been part of formal education for many years. In the nineteenth century, student teachers were trained to tell stories (Fox & Jennifer 2005).

Storytelling is not only important for literacy but can be applicable in other curriculum areas. Storytelling is enjoyable, creative, responsive, active, inclusive and flexible. Stories being enjoyable are an important factor in imparting happiness in students. Martin Seligman (2003), a psychologist has shown through his study, that positive enjoyment improves learning. It also teaches the children to be creative by creating their own stories. Two ways of using stories in teaching language are, to use traditional tales which has number of characters and other way is to create a story.

About Panchatantra

To teach his students in a short period of time, Vishnusharma creatively used the stories of different animals and human beings. As his students were not so eager to study through the routine method he found an exciting and entertaining method, that is, teaching through narration or with the help of stories. Interestingly, the characters in the fables are often animals, perhaps because children find animals interesting, and have a strange way of connecting with them. Panchatantra is not just a compilation of tales with morals. It is a collection of stories within a story, a manner of story-telling that engages a reader very effectively. The end result is the communication of morals and deep philosophy without preaching (Meler 2011).

With the help of the characters of the story he tried to explain simple but useful and important concepts. As people remember stories that are well told and are centered on ideas the listeners either know well or want to know well (Schank & Berman 2006).

The unique feature of Panchatantra is the structure of frame story. This structure keeps the reader or the listener involved in the story. Draper (2006) says that “stories use words to create imaginings in hearers. That could be a description of education”. For learning anything new one needs concentration. Concentration is an active involvement in a task with undivided attention. As Vishnusharma also wanted them to learn, remember and use their knowledge afterwards, he explained the principles of political science and practical wisdom with the examples illustrated in the form of stories. In support of using narratives for teaching, Williams (2000) says that narrative text (fiction) is easier to comprehend and remember than expository text (factual and informational material). In modern education, narration is already in use but to limited extent.

Conle (2003) explored various narrative practices in the classroom to highlight the effects of different forms of engagement. According to her, such narrative practices can produce five outcomes: advances in understanding; increased interpretive competence; richer practice repertoires; changes in life and visions gained.

As the lessons were given through stories they were entertaining and at the same time brainstorming. So it was an important strategy which is useful in the current scenario also. A story tends to have more depth than a simple example. A story tells about some event – some particular individuals, and something that happens to them. Stories engage our thinking, our emotions, and can even lead to the creation of mental imagery (Green & Brock 2000). Individuals listening to stories react to them almost automatically, participating, in a sense, in the action of the narrative (e.g., Polichak & Gerrig 2002). Bringing all of these systems to bear on the material in your course helps student learning. Students are awake, following along, wanting to find out what happens next and how the story ends.

Bruner (1986) has contrasted the paradigmatic (logical, scientific) and narrative modes of thinking, but these modes need not be mutually exclusive in the classroom. As it is a very simple method it can be generalized. It can be used all over the world without any restriction.

It can be very entertaining while teaching subjects like mathematics or science. If a teacher finds that the students are not following what he is teaching then he can make a story using the same concepts. At the same time it can also be used if the students are getting bored. Another benefit of this method is it can be used without any educational aids. This does not require a video projector or an audio visual system. So it can also be efficiently used in economically developing countries. This method will enhance the creativity of the teacher and the students also as they can together construct a story related to the subject. Other perspective is about the development of moral and social identity. 'Story' is the most important piece of narration to induce moral values in the students at an early age. Through the stories the personal and social responsibility can be imparted into the students. They can understand the society and their role in the society. So in all it can be said that this method can really prove helpful if used widely.

Some Examples

Panchatantra' by Vishnu Sharma, written thousands of years ago, has much to offer by way of insight into human behaviour though the characters are entirely from the animal kingdom. Not surprisingly, the running theme of the 'Panchatantra' is "Knowledge is the true organ of sight, not the eyes" and is a practical guide to niti, or the art of intelligent living. The morals in the 'Panchatantra' are not preachy tales of good overpowering the evil but it teaches you how to be a good person in life. Franklin Edgerton, the Yale professor known for his masterly translation of the 'Bhagavad Gita', calls the 'Panchatantra' Machiavellian. He notes, "This is a textbook of artha, 'worldly wisdom', or niti, polity, which the Hindus regard as one of the three objects of human desire, the others being dharma, 'religion or morally proper conduct' and kama 'love'... The so-called 'morals' of the stories... glorify shrewdness and practical wisdom in the affairs of life, and especially of politics, of government." Joseph Jacobs said, "...if one thinks of it, the very raison d'etre of the Fable is to imply its moral without mentioning it". The stories convey messages that are direct and simple. Malicious gossip can destroy even great friendships. Never trust an enemy; "reformed enemy" is an oxymoron. Deceit is the only way to overcome an unscrupulous enemy. Caste, colour and religion are no barriers to forming lasting bonds; against tyrants, unity is strength. A fool and his gains are soon parted. An intelligent man can overcome adversity by the use of his wit. The

consequences of an ill-conceived hastily executed action could be death. The stories of the 'Panchatantra' offer us the possibility of making our lives richer and more meaningful. Through the wisdom of its fables the 'Panchatantra' offers a vision of us, like a mirror it reflects our society. In so doing, it makes us aware of the fact that solutions lie within ourselves only.

For example we can take two stories from panchatantra

1st we can take for example the story of The Monkey and the Crocodile. In the said story a monkey lives in a jamun tree near a bank of a river. One day a crocodile came to rest under the tree and the monkey offered some sweet jamuns to the croc, (here we get to learn atithi devo bhaba) the croc was too happy to taste the sweet jamuns and gradually comes daily and in the process the croc and the monkey become friends, (here we see love can make hunter and prey friends also). One day the monkey gives some jamuns to the croc as a gift for his wife. After eating the sweet jamuns the croc's wife persuades the croc to bring the heart of the monkey as that would be sweeter after eating these sweet jamuns everyday. With a heavy heart the croc agreed (we often put our relationship in trouble to please others) then the croc went and invited the monkey for lunch at his place after persuading a lot the monkey believed him and sat on his back to go to his place. The croc was simple and on the way told the monkey that he is taking him so that his wife can taste his heart. The monkey was scared for a second but he kept his calm and told the croc that he had left his heart in the tree and they have to return to the tree to bring back the heart. The foolish croc returned ashore and the monkey jumped to the land and went to the tree and never returned.

This story teaches us mainly that when in difficult situation we should not lose our calm and if we have common sense then we can handle difficult to difficult situations. The students will learn a lesson of life in an entertaining way. In our modern day life there are a lot of crocs who are hovering around us to have our hearts. Stay alert stay safe.

The second story that we can take for example is the story of the thirsty crow.

Once there was a crow that was very thirsty. He tried to find some source of water but failed. Lately he found a pitcher with some water in it but unfortunately the neck of the pitcher was too narrow for the crow to enter his beak into and reach the water. He thought for a while and

saw some pebbles nearby. He brought one after another pebbles and dropped them in the pitcher. The water level gradually rose up and the crow drank water and flew away.

This story teaches us that when there is a will there is a way. While in a situation you may feel there is no way out but don't be disheartened think and definitely some way will always be there.

Authors take on role of storytelling in classrooms

Storytelling has tremendous benefits for classroom learning. When we meet heterogeneous groups at +2 level where we get a mixed audience group from different medium schools. When at times as a teacher we struggle to engage our students as fluent English speakers and reader, you can always set aside your worries and resort back to age old style of teaching through stories.

If we do these in our class at times and gradually try to get learners involved in the creative process then surely with the passage of time it is going to create a healthy ambience for the students to use their creative faculty in a positive manner. We can create a memorable learning experience for the students by using the power of storytelling inside the classrooms. By engaging students with compelling stories that impart important material, teachers reach students both emotionally and biochemically, increasing the potential for rich learning experiences.

Spending a little extra time on storytelling during lesson planning and actual classroom time keeps the learning experience highly engaging, creative, and truly, dynamically human. A story-filled classroom also encourages students to relate their own stories (whether factual or fictional), which helps grow their critical thinking, memory, and vocabulary skills.

As a Teacher we can keep a few things in mind-

- You can make the classroom ambience bit entertaining setting aside the attention of students to listening to a story.

- You can initially go slowly with some physical actions like postures and gestures, incorporated to help learners assimilate themselves with new and difficult words of English.
- You can ask simple questions in between as- ask to repeat difficult words with you and laugh with you, it may also work as an ice breaker for learners
- We have to motivate learners during initial stages giving him confidence if he is struck in some word or by praising for any little deeds of, like speaking some part in his own language in English etc
- At times we can stage a drama type atmosphere and ask students to act like the characters and with passage of time can ask them to create their own story line, own dialogues and in turn enhance skills like writing, speaking, acting etc.
- They can learn creativity at personal level and can also develop group activity or team work which will help them in future also.
- We can have language games from stories like puzzle words, simple sentence making etc
- We can take them till the problem and let them decide what ways are there to get out of the situation like croc is taking the monkey and tells the reason, the monkey is in river, how will he save his life, or the crow is thirsty the water level is low how will he manage to drink water etc. These questions will drive certain different out of the box answers from students.
- Lastly we can gradually give them simple topics from day today life to create small pieces on topics like family, sports, fashion, movies etc.

Narrative, telling stories and anecdotes forms an important part of our everyday communication. Scholars agree that storytelling creates an useful learning situation. It allows our minds to think outside the box of our own experiences and to develop creative ways to problem-solving. It also allows us to identify with the theme and character of the story and to see their way of thinking.

Short stories will never fail us in accomplishing our purpose because -

- Story telling is no doubt the most popular genre found everywhere irrespective of culture, language and countries.

- The structure of a story of having an introduction, body and conclusion will teach them a lot of things of writing like essays, stories, any answer to a question etc.
- When you get appreciation from others for your own creativity it boosts your morale and can get you in many good places also.
- Children normally like fantasy worlds and writing their own story permits them to express themselves more clearly and innovatively. They develop strong imagination powers.
- We should not get bogged up by spelling errors, grammar errors, wrong pronunciation etc from the very beginning as it can de motivate the students.
- If given full freedom then in later stages they can fine tune their spelling and other minor errors gradually.
- They will get a platform to live their dreams and can express their dreams in pen and paper which will definitely enhance their creativity as well as their linguistic skills.

It will help us in enhancing their academic achievement by developing writing skills and memory power and creativity. It will help in fine-tuning the learner's communication skills inside and outside classrooms in his social circles also. It develops his reading skills and his listening skills also. Finally his self motivation is enriched and it can take a student to new heights of success in life.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be said that Panchatantra has vital importance in the world literature for its contribution in the field of practical wisdom. In India, it was narrated to teach the students who were not much interested in studies. The disinterest of students about learning is a major problem of modern education where Panchatantra can come to help as an interesting technique in bringing these students again towards studies, schools and education. Panchatantra has an element of entertainment, wisdom, creativity and logical thinking in it. The elements can be aptly used by the teachers, students and parents. It might help the teachers to understand how to involve their students in the process of learning and how to weave the threads of knowledge with the threads of entertainment. Panchatantra is a piece of ancient Indian literature which can be useful in the modern education because of its specialties and can still contribute a lot with a directed and dedicated research in this field. If

we use stories carefully in our classrooms then someday our L2 learners will complete their journey from “CAN I?” to “I CAN”.

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