Audio Stories – Yes!
Video – No Thanks

Thoughts on media format from storyteller Judy Lubin

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When I first announced my intention to begin recording audio storytelling CDs, plenty of thoughtful, well meaning parents asked me why, in this age of You Tube, wouldn't I produce video recordings, instead of just audio. I took this input seriously and thought a lot about it - and whenever I say "think", I typically mean "research"!

Undoubtedly, the best storytelling – hands down! – is live. Neither audio nor video can truly capture the connection that occurs between teller and listener when the two can look each other in the eye and actually connect. When I tell a story live, I am truly taking the children on a journey through their own emotions. I deliberately bring myself to actually feel the emotions that each character would be feeling – joy for the prince at the moment of first connecting with his higher self (usually symbolized by the princess), greed and envy for the witch who captures the innocent child, frustration for the hero when his quest seems unachievable.

When people are in actual physical contact with other, emotions are literally contagious. To show this point (which most of us have likely already experienced in real life), psychologists have put research subjects into the same room with a screen between them. Even without speaking to each other, both subjects emerge, after only a few minutes, with their emotions matching the one who went in feeling the strongest.

In his most recent book *Social Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman, claims that emotions most likely transmit due to the "low road" (subconscious) neurological processing of

mirror neurons. Human brains, and those of other mammals as well, are filled with special neurons, called mirror neurons, whose sole job is to imitate. Mirror neurons are used in learning and memory, but they are also used to make a social connection between people. When two people connect "mirror neuron to mirror neuron", we feel in sync with other. When we are in sync, we enjoy the conversation and come to like the person to whom we are speaking. But, more so, the ability to sync with others is the starting point for empathy and for the building of relationships.

When I am telling stories live, I sync with the children. They "catch" my emotions, even though I do little to bring out the emotions in my voice (too much drama can overwhelm some children). In a way, the children actually experience the emotional journeys as if they are living them. In so doing, they learn that acting on feelings of greed or envy, like those of the witch, leads to demise, but bearing the frustration of the hero on the difficult quest and rising above it with optimism and courage brings them to a happy ending.

This is why I feel that live storytelling is always superior and why I encourage parents to tell stories to their own children. But, our modern lives are busy. Most parents haven't the time to reach even modest proficiency at storytelling (it doesn't take much, honest!) and even less time to go through the millions of stories available in order to choose those that meet our children's current needs. And then there's the car rides. Even with all of the experience that I have, I prefer not to tell stories while I'm driving. I don't multi-task very well and find that I either don't pay attention to the road, or don't pay attention to the story. Neither leads to an optimal experience. So, just like you, I play recorded stories for my children.

Recorded audio does not allow for mirror neuron connection, and therefore, can only be a second best alternative to live telling. Yet, it does give the benefits of oral-aural storytelling (from the mouth to the ear). Oral-aural storytelling is the oldest form of literature. For example, even after they were first written down, Biblical stories were still primarily read aloud to the population, most of whom could not read, and none of whom owned their own copy of the written stories even if they could read. Modern day literary analysis of the original Biblical stories shows that they are filled with metaphor and with literary tricks that give small rewards in deeper comprehension to those who are paying attention closely enough to follow alliterations, word play, imagery and number games across chapters.

These stories were clearly meant both to be listened to with concentrated attention, and to help the listener achieve this level of concentration. Indeed, the only way to truly understand an oral-aural story is to pay close attention. Stories which originated in the oral-aural form, mine included, often sound fantastical, or even bizarre, at the surface, but are packed full of symbolism and metaphor which can only be grasped by those who are engaged in the story deeply enough to place themselves into the center of it. The end result is that those who frequently listen to oral-aural stories not only learn to deeply process literature, but also increase the capacity of their attention span!

Precisely because oral-aural stories require concentration and attention, they invite the imagination. Just try following a story without engaging your imagination. It will process like a dry academic lecture and present the same attention challenges! But

engage the imagination, and you're pulled right in. Whenever we listen to stories without accompanying illustrations, such as in the oral-aural format, we naturally paint our own illustrations on the canvas of our mind's eye through our imaginations (if we're paying attention to the story, that is). This leaves a lot of room to imagine ourselves in all of the roles, thus enhancing our connection to the story. The inner picturing process frequently leads to more meaningful and enjoyable illustrations, because they are so perfectly tailored to each individual listener.

You may notice when you listen to my audio tapes that, unlike a movie, they do not scream at you to pay attention to them. Instead of hypnotizing light effects, there is only one voice, no sound effects and minimal dramatic performance techniques – although I do ensure that my voice conveys the emotions that are felt directly in live storytelling. In my recordings, I recognize that the more work I do to entertain the listener, the less work the listener will have to do to imagine the story. But plenty of parents report that their children refuse to leave the car when the car ride stops before the end of the story! These children find the stories captivating because they have engaged their imaginations.

While I do play recorded audio for my children, I don't show them video (we don't even own a TV or DVD player!), especially of the folktales, many of which are too important to experience in such a limiting format. First, lets look at the instance of a video recording of a storyteller (me, for example) telling a story. Although the listeners can see the storyteller, the artificial presence leaves no room for a mirror neuron connection. For people to be in sync and "catching" each other's emotions, we have to be in actual physical contact and have sustained two-way eye contact. Virtual contact is not good enough. With video, as in audio, we still have no direct transfer of emotion as would occur in a live connection.

However, we still do have oral-aural storytelling, and gestures and non-verbal communication can enhance the expression of emotion in the voice. But, what we gain in gesture is completely overshadowed by the effect of the video on the visual processing portion of our cognitive abilities. With the visual areas of the brain busy watching the screen, they can't be used as a canvas for the listener's own illustrations. Imagination decreases, and so does our willingness to pay attention!

But wait, can't we handle that problem by filling the video with images, instead of just filming the storyteller as she speaks? Aside from the enormous increase in production costs (think of the budget for Disney's last film), full video grossly circumvents the oral-aural process and all of its benefits.

When all of the pictures are provided, on a silver platter, listeners do not have to work at listening to, nor understanding the story. Functional brain imagining shows that only two areas of the brain are active while watching video: the visual area, and the area that seeks novelty. This second portion continually activates because the brain process each flash of the video lights (hundreds of times per second) as if it were a new event – at first, at least. After entering the visual processing area, the brain realizes that, visually, each flash is actually the same as the last and the processing stops there. Although children may look like they are paying attention while watching video, this is an illusion. University of Washington pediatrics researcher Dimitri Christakis puts it this way, regarding

TV watching for very young children: "Yes, the baby is staring at the screen, but its wrong to think the child likes it. He or she has no choice in the matter. He's hard-wired to pay attention to anything that is fast moving, brightly colored or loud." Staring at the screen is a primitive reflex, not learning or attention. This is, no doubt, why researchers like Christakis have found a frightening correlation between TV watching and attention management issues.

In contrast, functional brain imaging shows that when children listen to an oral-aural story, the brain is active in substantially more areas than just the two used in video watching. Other researchers have discovered that when we imagine performing a task, the neural pathways in our brain activate in almost the same manner as they do when we actually perform the task. Studies even show that imagined athletic practice increases actual athletic performance. In other words, children imagining the illustrations of an oral-aural story are truly having a vicarious experience of an epic life journey, while children watching the same story on video are having an experience that, from a brain processing perspective, more closely parallels some forms of drug addiction.

But even more importantly, the video format prevents listeners from forming a personal connection to the story. When children look at a screen and see a detailed image of a character, they are far less likely to see themselves as that character. It takes a very well trained imagination, and even skills in symbolic processing which aren't available to young children, to override actual visual data that you are given on the screen and replace it with a version that represents yourself. Without this step of imagining yourself as the characters, it becomes very difficult to relate the story to an experience in our your life and to apply the story's lessons to yourself. Video watchers miss out on one of the most important aspects of the storytelling experience.

For all of these reasons, you won't see my stories on You Tube anytime soon. But I do feel comfortable offering stories on audio CD and assuring parents that their children will have a close to perfect storytelling experience, made even better when parents view my stories as examples and begin their own storytelling journey!