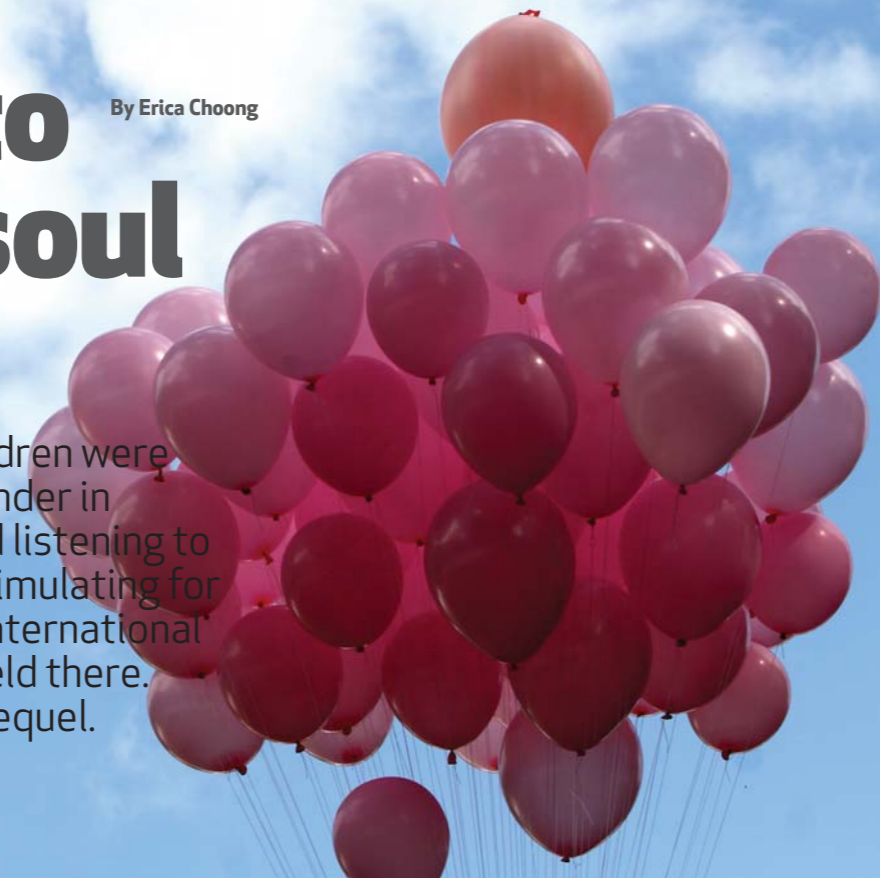




Stories to stir the soul

By Erica Choong

Penang's teachers and children were given a much-needed reminder in September that telling and listening to stories are fantastically stimulating for the imagination, when an international storytelling festival was held there. Let's hope there will be a sequel.



Quah Joo Tatt/E-pixels

"People are waking up to the power of storytelling. It was something that was always there, but got buried for a while in our rush towards modernity." — Sheila Wee

MALAYSIA WITNESSED its first ever storytelling festival on September 18, 2010 at the lush green grounds of Penang's Municipal Park. The Penang International Kids Storytelling (PINKS) Festival attracted a strong crowd of preschoolers, primary school students, educationists and parents; and a line-up of renowned storytellers from around the world was brought in to share with families the joys and importance of storytelling, and show that it can facilitate education at all levels.

"During the initial conceptualising stage," said project manager Chow Chee Keong, "we felt that we should first do it on a smaller, regional scale. However, we realised that in terms of work there was not much difference between a regional and an international one. We then decided that we could go all the way and do a full-fledged international event." The festival was organised on what Chow called a "shoe-string budget". "I doubt there are many two-day international events in Malaysia organised with a budget of RM60,000."

The art

Storytelling influences us in many ways, some overtly like religion and law, others covertly like propaganda and advertising. It defines our values and aspirations. According to *The World of Storytelling* by Anne Pellowski, the art is used to entertain, explain natural phenomena, honour supernatural forces, communicate with others, fulfil an aesthetic need for beauty through expressive language and record the actions or qualities of ancestors, in the hope that this would give them a kind of immortality.

Writing can be damaged and lost, but stories are always told, heard and remembered in hearts, passed on from father to son, mother to daughter and one generation to another across cultures. "Stories are like parasites," said Dr Margaret Read MacDonald, who has a PhD in Folklore from Indiana University, US. "If it's a good one, it stays in your mind. It's got you."

The passion

PINKS brought together storytellers of various backgrounds to share their stories both as a group and individuals. When asked what storytelling means to them, the lively Jeeva Raghunath answered, "My

life." The gentle touches, tight hugs, loud laughter, all have been great experiences to her. Raghunath has written books for children in English and Tamil.

To MacDonald, "Storytelling is a point of joy for both listener and teller."

Having fallen into storytelling by accident via the circuit of an academic background with training in Psychology and Social Research, Cassandra Wye from Britain believes that storytelling gives people the skills with which to be heard. "This is the best way I can find to make a contribution to the world."

Dr Wajuppa Tossa loves it because of the many things that she learns from stories. An associate professor at the Western Languages and Linguistics Department in Mahasarakham University, Thailand, she said one of her most memorable storytelling moments happened at a Seattle preschool. "I was so surprised by a little Chinese-American boy who came to hug and thank me for telling stories and for saying the only Chinese word that I could say, 'Xie xie.'"

Sheila Wee of Singapore, also known as the Godmother of Singapore Storytelling, loves stories and being able to hold people's attention with her voice. "What means most to me are the workshops where I train people to tell stories. It is very fulfilling when you see people gain confidence to tell stories and bring what they have learnt back to their work or home."

"Storytelling is an intrinsic part of our humanity," said Wee. "As human beings we think, dream and tell stories in every aspect of our daily lives." She said that what she does is just an extension of that natural predisposition and ability. Storytelling can be channelled to bring positive progressions, transcending geographical boundaries, languages, cultures and beliefs. Today, the art of storytelling is not only known for its historical and moral values, but is being embraced as an educational tool, business medium and information carrier for think-tanks, academics, politicians and the media.

Storytelling can reach everyone, even those most often ignored by society like street children and orphans,

forgotten elders and casualties of war. "It can be huge," explained Wye. Since 1991, her approach to storytelling, "Stories in Motion", has taken her around the globe, including war-torn Nepal. After 15 years of civil war, the socio-economic situation in that country was dire. Education had been severely reduced and teachers were desperate for training and tools for education. Wye became the first performer allowed on the streets of Nepal since the banning of outdoor gatherings by the former King. She engaged a crowd of over 1,000 adults and children, many of whom did not speak English, into a collaborative and interactive retelling of *The Great Big Enormous Turnip*.

She also provided training for educators, using storytelling skills to animate reading and excite learning, giving them a powerful tool to promote literacy. It cost very little and was portable.

The efficacy

Storytelling's ability to transmit messages rapidly, reaching the masses effectively and conveying thoughts affirmatively has led it to the doorsteps of diverse operations. What was once storytelling of fiction has become a medium to address even corporations. Raghunath says that the value of storytelling in the corporate environment is probably most evident in communication and conducts of presentation.

Whether it is to educate, report or influence, a successful presentation has to be fully engaging and



Chow Chee Keong.

Daniel Lee



Cassandra Wye



Dr Margaret Read MacDonald



Dr Wajuppa Tossa



Jeeva Raghunath



Sheila Wee

Quah Joo Tatt/E-pixels



Storytelling is one of the best ways to help children with emotional and communication difficulties.

University, US, carried out a study with two groups of children. One group was told stories from picture books and the other without pictures. The children were then asked to retell the stories. What she found was that the children that didn't have picture books garnered the ability to recall much better than their peers. They seemed to have gone deeper, with better comprehension, inference-making and ability to read between the lines. In contrast, the engagement and understanding of students from the other group were much more superficial.

"We need to bring storytelling back to the forefront of education," said Chow. "Over the years it has been relegated to 'only if we have time' activity, as more academic approaches have crept into our preschools and elementary schools."

If teachers were to tell stories, education would be a lot less stressful and probably a lot more effective. Communicating movingly with actions and verbal animations does not just close the knowing-doing gap. It eliminates the gap by stimulating the listener to co-create the idea.

This does not mean that all picture books should be put away. Toddlers will need them to make the connection with print before creating their own images. However, parents and teachers should encourage books without images alongside those that do. This promotes reading and introduces beautifully patterned languages and the intricacy of vocabulary to their children.



Top: A participant at the Children's Fairytale Fashion Parade, held at the PINKS Festival.

Bottom: Children were thoroughly entertained and mesmerised during the storytelling sessions at the PINKS Festival.

produce the intended outcome. Listeners understand complicated ideas not tediously, dimension by dimension, but as a whole.

In our work places, we find that we are constantly involved in theoretical discussions. Ideas are exchanged like missiles, forcing one to adopt a mental framework established by another person. The options are usually to accept or reject it. Narrative, by contrast, comes at us collaboratively, inviting us gently to follow the story, more like a dance than a battle. When the listener follows a story, he or she can invent a parallel story in his or her own mind. Furthermore, conceptual communications can be dull because they are populated with things, not people. Stories enliven them. "Power-Point may fail you, so trust yourself, you're the best storyteller," said Raghunath.

Wee teaches numerous storytelling skills courses and workshops, advocating language and literacy, creative writing, character education and leadership. "Stories are not so much about words, they're about images," she said. "It's about going into the imagination. When you tell a story, the words should come out of what you see, hear and feel in your imagination. Children live in their imagination. You can sometimes see children living the stories with their body, living them vicariously."

Storytelling, she added, is a powerful educational tool. "Your brain is in an active form when listening to stories. Listening without pictures forces your mind to think in pictures." Hence, the more stories a child is told, the more they will be able to develop imagery thinking.

What happens if we are not able to think that way?
Dr Rebecca Isbell from East Tennessee State

Storytelling is one of the best ways to help children with emotional and communication difficulties. Such disabilities prevent them from expressing themselves like ordinary kids. Storytelling helps them to express and explore their emotions, as well as develop language abilities, especially those suffering from autism.

In Penang, Wee ran a training session for the betterment of marginalised groups, which included those who worked with children with autism, adults with learning disabilities as well as the rural communities. This goes to show how promoting storytelling can have far-reaching benefits for all communities.

The future

Storytellers and the public alike are eager to see more similar events. A schoolteacher said, "I think the event is good exposure for the kids and also shows us teachers that there is more than one way for kids to learn."

"I think it's great and as far I've seen, it is up to the standard of international storytelling," said a parent.

Where there are dedicated purveyors of stories, audiences for them will grow. It is hoped that PINKS will launch more events and training operations to develop community cohesion and confidence as well as skills in educators, ultimately incepting storytelling

as an important component of Malaysian education. The country should move forward with creative and critical thinking minds, superior communication skills and advanced collaborative working.

Further developments and long-term plans are still needed to widen the impact and incite change. "We should start planning for the second PINKS Festival now," said Chow, adding that the organisers will need to do a better job of attracting sponsors. He would also like to see more schools take part. "The Tamil school children who were bussed to the festival were so enthusiastic listening to Jeeva Raghunath's stories in Tamil."

These storytellers have chosen a life of globe-trotting because they believe that the art of storytelling gives hope and tears down disparities, discriminations and disabilities. Make time to listen to one another and enjoy each other's stories about the everyday incidents and accidents of ordinary life. Who knows where it may lead. ☺

Erica Choong is a new addition to SERI, contributing her time before pursuing a degree in Economics in the University of Melbourne, Australia.



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