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Storytimes That Go Sideways

Educators share their tips to turn them right side up

By Patricia J. Murphy | May 22, 2023

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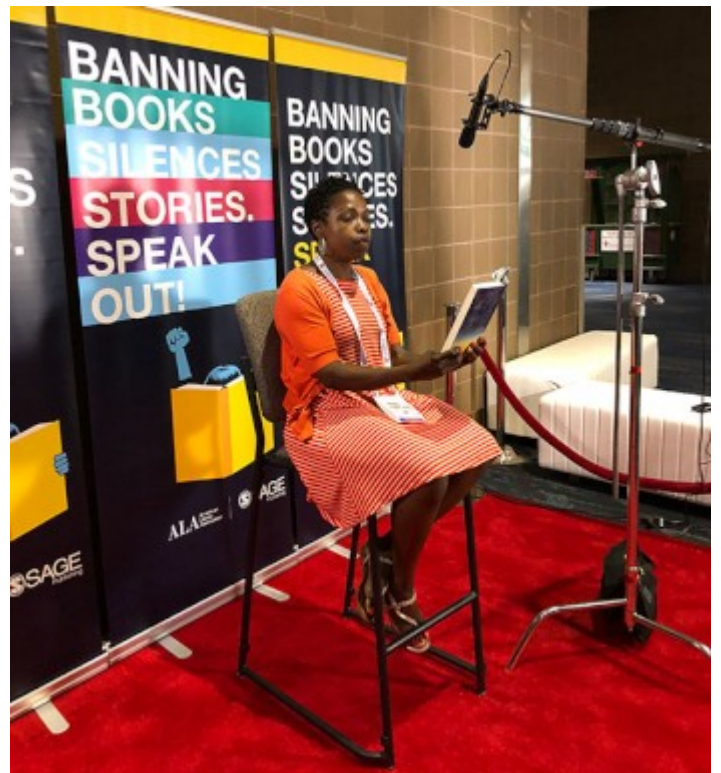


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At this very moment, somewhere in the world, there are teachers and librarians having storytimes—and some aren't going so smoothly. From behavior issues to short attention spans, technology fails, and the like, things can and often do go differently than planned. With this in mind, we spoke with three educators about storytimes that veer off course into the land of the unexpected, why this isn't always a bad thing, and some of the ways they turn things around if necessary.

As a veteran youth services librarian at Worthington Library in Ohio, **Desiree Thomas** has plenty of tips and techniques to turn any storytime into a fun and functional experience. She uses her sense of humor, years of storytime and storytelling experience, and her yoga background to get her young audience not just sitting on the edges of their mats—and their parents off of their phones—but moving and grooving. Well, that's always her hope.

To begin any storytime, Thomas first reads the room. She takes stock of who is in the storytime space to see how to proceed. She may start with a silly song integrating lots of movement, and then transition to a picture book, inviting everyone to be part of the story with call and responses and refrains. And, she means *everyone*.



Desiree Thomas at a Banned Books event at ALA.

“I see our storytimes as a partnership that includes the children, their parents and/or caregivers, and me,” Thomas said. “I’ll often ask the children to ‘go find your grownups’ when we begin. This way, I’m not the only adult in the storytime space and we’re all doing this together.”

Once she has everybody’s attention, she will set up the parameters of the storytime area and share necessary safety reminders, including where the fire exits and bathrooms are located. She’ll also offer a gentle reminder for parents/caregivers on the benefits of participating with their children. “I tell them that if they participate, their kids will, too,” Thomas said. “We all know that kids are always watching their parents; they need to be a model for their kids so that they will truly engage. I find that it’s really the parents’ connection in the storytime space with their children that helps the kids enjoy storytime even more.”

But, even with this connection, and everything Thomas does, the wheels on the bus can fall off. “I may notice if some of the kids are starting to act squirrely,” Thomas said, “but they are kids after all. So I’m going to accept how they choose to show up in that moment—as long as it doesn’t put anyone in harm’s way. And I’m going to give them grace.”

Thomas may also choose not to finish the book that they are reading, and instead segue into a song or activity. She says this often helps kids regain a connection to the storytime.

One way she might do this is by handing out egg shakers for the kids and parents to use. “I may ask them, ‘Can you shake your eggs high or low, shake them fast or slow?’ ” Thomas said. It’s these types of hands-on techniques, along with Thomas’s positive attitude, that turns the ship around.

“If it works, great. If not, it may be the end of the story or song, but it’s *never* the end of the storytime,” Thomas said. “You just have to pivot because the whole experience is not for me—it’s for them.”

To ensure that the storytime is tailored to her audience, she uses books that are short, fun, and inclusive with diverse families, cultures, multilingual words, and filled with illustrations that work with the text. She also includes as much music and movement throughout the storytime to create a “controlled recess” atmosphere where kids can feel safe, make friends, and learn reading readiness skills without realizing they are learning.

“Our storytimes are all about introducing kids to concepts that will help them with the process of learning to read,” Thomas said, “and reading books where they see themselves, communicate that they are part of a global story, and make a bigger table for all!”

With all of the natural beauty that surrounds **Rebecca Saxon**, a youth services librarian, at the Eugene Public Library in Eugene, Ore., it’s surprising that local residents plan on doing anything other than hiking, biking, or exploring the great outdoors. But they do head inside sometimes. And Saxon and her children’s department is one of the reasons.

That’s because Saxon and the other librarians’ storytimes can take kids and parents alike to magical places. But these successful storytimes don’t just happen. Saxon relies on her 10 years of experience, keen observational skills, thoughtful plans, and a bit of intuition to take her storytimes to another level—even when they might be going sideways. “I have this sense when kids are really into a book or enjoying the song—and when they’re just not into it,” she said. That’s when she makes a change and encourages other storytime presenters and parents to do the same.

“I always say that it’s okay if something isn’t working; you can move on to something else as long as it’s as fun and engaging as possible, developmentally appropriate, and offers a model for parents to use with their children to help develop early literacy skills.”

She tries to integrate the ALA’s Five Literacy Skills: “Read, Write, Play, and Sing” into her storytimes and activities. Other times, she might offer outdoor storytimes and playtime for the kids, and a chance for parents/caregivers to connect with other adults, swap parenting tips, or make new friends.

Saxon is constantly discovering new stories, songs, and rhymes, and making copious notes of what went well—and what didn't. She also values brainstorming before and debriefing after storytimes with her colleagues. These strategies and others have helped her steer her storytimes to where her kids and parents need, and want, to go.

Her greatest weakness, she said, may be her greatest strength. She admits she works on it in the shower, in the car, and on walks with her dogs. "I learned early on that I don't have the best singing voice. But I also have seen how much singing can engage audiences—and it brings so much joy!" Saxon said. "For these reasons, I sing to remind parents/caregivers that kids don't care if you can carry a tune. I want them to be unafraid to sing in front of their kids, especially since it will help develop early literacy skills and a lifelong love of reading. That's why we do what we do!"

Zeena M. Pliska, a children's author and kindergarten teacher in the Los Angeles school district, says that she has never had a storytime go sideways. Using an approach inspired by the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, Pliska's classroom is all about listening to each other.

"If you are listening, you are open to a child's response and interaction with the books that you are reading to them," Pliska said. "You don't try to control [their reactions]. For example, if a child says, 'My cat's feet stink!'"—this connection may not be what the author intended with their story, but it is the level of student engagement Pliska is listening for during their story times. She likens it to what Dave Grohl of the Foo Fighters once said about music fans at a concert. "Nobody has the same experience, even though it's a shared experience of singing the same words," Pliska said. "No one attaches the same meanings to the words. Everyone is having their own personal experiences and relationships with the words that the author wrote."

While Pliska's students are free to share throughout the story, Pliska will not stop her reading to ask them questions. "I'm not a teacher who stops in the middle of the book to check for comprehension," Pliska said. "I've had enough kids in front of me over the years that are crawling out of their skins and saying, 'Can you just finish the story?' I don't believe asking these types of questions is a good way to hear a story," she said.

[Pliska believes that the goal is creating just the right conditions to learn through an engaging literacy experience. "You want the relationship between the person who created the words and those who are receiving them to be authentic and not have the reader impose their expectations," Pliska said. "Otherwise, it can destroy this relationship—and cancels out why you're doing storytimes."

Pliska's storytimes have been known to transport her students and herself to alternate places. "There's a fullness in the room—and an understanding that however a story hits you and wherever it takes you, that is what storytimes are all about: the magic of being read to, and reading aloud."

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