

Storytelling as a Global Language: The Library Garden

Paper and Workshop by Morgan Schatz Blackrose

If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need.

Marcus Tullius Cicero

A well told traditional story not only offers a positive literacy experience to its listeners, it can also act as a foundation for exploring language, ideas, relationships and concepts. The notion of story as a metaphor is explored in relation to teaching elementary students that the library is a garden. The folktale I have chosen to introduce the concept is called 'A Fair Division of Crops' and can be found in *Feast: fabulous food folktales and activities (2013)*. The story has provenance in many countries and some children may already be familiar with its variants. It is often classified as a trickster tale (Aarne-Thompson- Uther type 1030 (Crop division between man and ogre).

In addition to the oral telling, a storyboard exercise is presented to visually understand aspects of the story. The learning outcomes for the combined oral and visual storytelling are many and varied, and include understanding spatial concepts such as above, below, inside and outside, vocabulary expansion, the development of oral language skills, listening and participation protocols, understanding methods of classification and grouping and an exploration of how humans interact with the natural environment.

Further to the initial storytelling, a vibrant library 'event' incorporating the library collection and student artistic, literary, dramatic and musical contributions can be created, based on the concept of The Library Garden. Exploring the metaphor will not only inform the content and direction of the 'event' but also broaden student perspectives on the role of the school library in their life.

A garden is many things to many people, and there are different types of gardens to reflect their variety of purposes. Some examples follow: A botanical garden is a repository of specially collected and cultivated plants primarily for scientific and educational research, a sacred or religious garden is designed for rest and contemplation, a public garden is for enjoying recreation and leisure pursuits, a kitchen or vegetable garden is for growing produce to eat, a medicine garden is for growing healing plants.

Similarly there are different types of libraries, such as public libraries for everyone, research libraries for academics, school libraries for students and specialist libraries lending out tools, seeds, toys and music. Although each library, like each garden has a specific purpose, they have common elements. Most importantly, all gardens and all libraries are tailored to meet the specific needs of their users.

Here is a list of additional ways that the school library, sometimes known as the media, information or resource centre, is like a garden:

It is a purpose built space, with specially designed areas for storage, processing and displaying its collection. Bookcases and trolleys separate and group books so that they are accessible to the students, in the same way that rows, mounds, fences and trellises in a vegetable garden provide the optimum growing places for the plants.

The school library collection includes a variety of resources such as books and other texts, audio recordings, computers, games and puppets in the collection. A garden

may grow trees, vegetables, herbs, flowers, shrubs, vines, and include environmental structures such as rocks, fences, water features and seats.

There are specially designed quiet spaces for students to sit and read in their library, like there are in a sacred garden.

The library provides for the student's study needs, nourishing their brain in the same way that a vegetable garden can nourish a student's dietary needs.

The library collection is catalogued and there is additional signage for grouped items, such as 'picture books,' 'chapter books,' and 'biographies,' so that students know where all the items are shelved. A well-planned garden also has appropriate signage or indicators. Every plant has a place and purpose.

There are special times during the year when parts of the collection are highlighted, or on display, such as Book Week and International days. A garden's features are also highlighted at special times, such as when the plants are flowering or fruiting.

Librarians have a cycle for performing different tasks in the library. For example they may shelve books daily, shelf read weekly, catalogue monthly, process books each term, weed the collection bi-annually, hold a book sale annually. In the same way a gardener may work on a time cycle that also incorporates the seasons. They may water the plants daily, weed weekly, fertilize monthly, transplant seedlings every two months, and prepare garden beds, plant seeds and harvest according to the season.

A book is like a garden carried in the pocket.

Chinese proverb

If the library is a garden then how do we let students know it is their garden? Ownership implies a sustained engagement, and this can only be fostered through students regularly interacting with the library.

It is here that the most important element in the library must be recognized. It is not the venue or the collection itself, but the librarian. In the same way that a garden no longer tended by the gardener, will soon be overrun with weeds, a library that is no longer tended by a librarian will become useless. The librarian is not only responsible for ensuring that the library is functional, accessible and current, she also maintains its connectedness. She is the conductor for the library network, connecting individual students and teachers, the school itself and local communities to the global community. She navigates, translates, sources and advocates for the library user. Through her the student not only discovers that weeds can be flowers or that trees can be teachers, they learn that everything is connected, including themselves.

©Morgan Schatz Blackrose 2014