

Audio Dramatization as a Reading Comprehension Tool

Betty and Jerry Woodfill

The Objective(s)

American copyright law is partially responsible for this work. The author(s) sought engaging short stories suitable for collegiate developmental reading courses. The initial candidates were the vignette writings (*In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*) fashioned into *A Christmas Story* by author Jean Shepherd. Having kindred roots with Shepherd as a Hohmann (actually Hammond) High School Wildcat, one of the co-authors lived out his formative years, (1944 - age 2 through 1960 - age 17) a mere five miles from the birthplace of Ralphie's fabled *Red Rider Lightning Loader Range Model 200 Shot Air Rifle*.

Shepherd's delightful anecdotes of the 1940s offered ideal candidates for a study of oral versus read comprehension. Their humor and entertaining content was fraught with powerful vocabulary building prose leading to an average twenty word-list per story.

Especially suitable was Shepherd's account, *Amateur Night at the Orpheum*. an amusing description of the talent show at the Orpheum Theatre in Hohmann, Indiana. (actually Hessville, a suburb of Hammond) The operative concept was to memorize the account, perform it as a dramatic, standup Shep-like performance then immediately test class retention with twenty multiple choice questions. Subsequently, another class section would read the same narrative then answer the test questions without the benefit of either the oral presentation or printed text.

Because Jean Shepherd's stories have endearing charm for a broad age, social, racial, and educational audience, they seemed ideal for the project. However copyright law posed a dilemma. Their use in the classroom in either printed or acted form required copyright approval. Additionally, multiple copies for large classes need be purchased by both students and the project authors.

After reading virtually all of Shepherd's works dealing with his beloved denizens of Hohmann, Indiana, the authors cloned Shepherd's writing, vocabulary, and anecdotes in *Christmas Story* fashion. Entitled, similar to Shep's *In God We Trust*, the authors' *One Nation Under God, All Others Choose Your Own Deity* has 35 vignettes. These, mostly non-fiction incidents of 5 to 15 pages, could be performed or read to the class. They, along with the comprehension test, could easily be completed in a single 55 minute class period. This, too, was advantageous compared to Shep's stories, most of which were much too long for a single class period.

After considerable editing of the stories' text, the compellation became a self published 240 page book. In the interim, one of the co-authors became a full time instructor at a local junior college teaching developmental reading/writing. Based on her course content, she as co-author fashioned questions for class discussion and word lists from the 35 stories. Her questions highlighted (1) inference, (2) critical analysis (3) empathy (4) comprehension (5) mood (6) tone (7) argument and (8) vocabulary throughout the stories.

Prior to applying the concept in the classroom, the authors produced an audio CDs of each story. This freed, the co-author, a government electrical engineer, from having to perform the oral versions in class. Instructors would benefit having the stories readily available via an inexpensive CD player for class use.

Operational, Instructional, and Content Solutions

When class numbers are large, the use of copyrighted materials is especially challenging. For the comprehension comparison study, the solution was the creation of a tri-fold booklet composed of both the stories and corresponding tests. By judiciously selecting font size, each of the 35 stories was fashioned into an 8.5" X 14" duplex tri-fold. Likewise was each of the corresponding question/vocabulary list worksheets duplex printed and tri-folded.

Since the presentation of each story was either read aloud (or played via the CD player) or read silently, the

number of printed copies need only equal the largest class size. Since all tests were multiple choice, inexpensive notebook paper served as answer sheets. With most computer printers capable of using 8.5" x 14" paper, duplexing is achieved by simply selecting the word processor's printer's odd page option and page number for one side of the sheet then turning the printed sheet over and selecting the even option with the subsequent even page number. For the cost of two sheets of legal sized paper, a single student has both the text and test for a class session. (Of course, the stories and corresponding tests are available as a digital printable .pdf file formatted for legal size paper.)

With copyright, cost and class time challenges dealt with, the author(s)' interaction with the developmental student population began. A number of questions remained, (1) Were the stories compelling enough to hold the hearers or readers' attention? (2) Was the content, based on the author's world view, appropriate [Indeed, even Shepherd's writings and oral programs can challenge content censors. There is pften much profanity] Because of the age of those enrolled in developmental college reading classes (post high school to adults), this was somewhat mitigated. However, reviewers were asked to comment, and edits were made accordingly. This was the process which resulted in the following summary of initial results:

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Results Summary

The Approach

The subjects of the study numbered approximately 40 students of a reading developmental education program of a local junior college. A broad range of ages, occupation and educational status comprised the test population.

At the onset, the study approach was conducted as described above with (1) subsequent classes and class sessions tested on the orally performed then read versions of the short stories. The oral vs. read scenarios were

interchanged between classes to normalize the data.

(2) While the initial stories were performed via an inexpensive audio CD player, plans were for later live oral presentations/recitations by the stories' author. Plans were for assessing the advantage, or disadvantage, of the live-oral presentation approach, i.e., live versus audio CD.

(3) Additionally, effort was undertaken to examine results based on the content of the stories, i.e., the entertainment effect. Colleagues and friends were consulted, asked to read the subject stories and grade their "interest value" respectively. This assessment was to be correlated with oral and read class presentation results.

Comments: At the onset, no grades were given the students in the interest of engendering cooperation. Later plans were for a daily grade to be entered based on the multiple choice comprehension and vocabulary tests.

Predictions versus Results

The authors went beyond the developmental college population, asking friends and other groups to participate in the study. Among the stories used were: *The Spalding 7 and the Titleist 3:23*, *The Across the Tracks Girl*, *The Dirty, Disgusting, and Diseased*, and *He'll Blow His Fingers Off*. *The Nurse's Office*, *the Dirty Disgusting, and Diseased*, and *The Battle of the Alimentary Canal*. Initially, it was thought that the most entertaining of the 35 samples were deemed too long (25+ minutes) for groups to hear or read at a single sitting, in or out of class. However, based on the entertainment content, this was not the case. Additionally, it was discovered that the prospect of the comprehension test greatly encouraged interested listening and reading.

At the onset, it was predicted that the audio versions would reap the best retention. However, in some cases, this was not so. A former elementary school reading teacher of minority students (one of the original Brantwoodians) listened to the complete set of audios then read the published version. Her assessment was that the published version was altogether more engaging. Additionally, a friend of the authors, an excellent grammarian, scored poorly on the

comprehension test after hearing one of the audio tracks.

Puzzled, the authors sought an explanation. "I'm a sight not an audio learner explained their friend." Obviously, this was an issue that would significantly skew results, a factor needing attention as the study progressed.

Future Plans

The co-authors chose to install the stories and audio files on-line:

www.spaceacts.com/dfr_web_site/dfrhome.htm

This would benefit the Developmental Education user community in keeping with the two fold objective for the study: (1) to provide public domain non-copy-righted resources for developmental education use, and (2) to make available inexpensive reproducible class materials.

Below are the listed test story candidates employed in the study:

Item	Duration
10_Preface	5:44
11_My_Christmas_Story	3:53
12_The_Shep_Map	22:19
13_A_Tavern_in_the_Town	17:58
14_Excelsior_for_the_Erudite	13:41
15_Brantwoodian_Politics	5:48
16_The_Nurses_Office	25:56
17_The_Lone_Ranger_Letdown	13:36
18_Shop_is_Shop	11:55
19_Hammond_High_School	18:26
20_My_Rich_Unde	11:18
21_He'll_Blow_His_Fingers_Off	9:51
22_I_Never_Knew_My_Parents	10:56
23_The_Attic	7:00
24_The_Darkroom	23:13
25_Across_the_Tracks_Girl	17:51
26_The_Hoosier_Hysteric	12:16
27_The_Truck_Driver	23:44
28_Rock_n_Roll_Hallof_Shame	11:15
29_The_Ledger	20:33
30_The_cottage	11:32
31_The_Family_Tree	17:48
32_The_Pharaohs_Fury	17:40
33_Captain_Video_My_Hero	13:23
34_The_Spalding_7_and_Titiest_3-23	16:58
35_dirty_disgusting_diseased	27:57
36_The_Town_Theater	17:50
37_Living_At_Ease	15:20
38_What_My_Dad_Never-Taught_Me	30:28
39_The_Pompous_Explicative_Deleted	27:02
40_Brantwood_Believe_It_Or_not	16:44
41_Cold_War_Kid	19:42
42_The_Report_Card	25:17
43_Things_Same_Things_Changed	39:21
44_Writing_Jean_Shepherd-Like	17:07
45_Postword	3:16

About the Co-authors:

Betty and Jerry Woodfill

Betty and Jerry Woodfill have been married for 43 years. They have two married sons, Jared, an attorney, and Matt, a pastor. While Betty is from Nacogdoches, Texas, Jerry is a native of Indiana. Attending Rice University on a basketball scholarship, Jerry met Betty, an elementary school teacher, after graduating as an electrical engineer and joining NASA.

Betty Woodfill entered the field of developmental education as an adjunct instructor at San Jacinto College (Central) in Pasadena, Texas. After serving 14 years in an adjunct capacity, she was selected as a full time faculty member of the San Jacinto Language Skills department in 2006. In that capacity, Betty participated in a number of national and state convention gleaning ideas about improving student reading comprehension and writing skills.

Simultaneously, Jerry continued his work at NASA which began in the mid 1960s as the Apollo Program warning system engineer. However, in recent years, he devoted a portion of his time to educational outreach for the space agency.

With the performance of the study of oral versus read comprehension, another marriage ensued between Betty's reading/writing experience and Jerry's appreciation for reading/writing and educational outreach.



