Supercharged storytimes, supercharged solutions: Enhancing storytimes with a research-based community of practice

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Abstract
This article is a narrative of our session at the Pacific Northwest Library Association (PNLA) Conference in Calgary on August 3, 2016, where we provided background on the research behind Supercharged Storytimes and then presented tips, tricks, and effective practices to help library staff to be intentional and interactive in the planning and delivery of early literacy storytimes. We also emphasized the importance of building a practitioner community to encourage professional growth through peer feedback and self-reflection of storytime programs. Storytime practitioners, both brand new and those with years of experience, will discover how to supercharge their storytimes and make an impact on the children in their communities.

Introduction
This pre-conference workshop offered an overview of the storytime planning, delivery, and assessment approach first developed during the research of Project VIEWS2 (Valuable Initiatives in Early Literacy that Work Successfully views2.ischool.edu) and then transformed by OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) into *Supercharged Storytimes* for widescale delivery. Project VIEWS2 is the first study that demonstrates that what librarians do in their storytime programs has a positive impact on the early literacy behaviors of the children who attend such programs. This study began as a conversation between Dr. Eliza T. Dresang, then the Beverly Cleary Professor of Children's and Youth Services at the UW, and various librarians and administrators across the state of Washington. Dr. Dresang wanted to know how research could provide support for public libraries and enhance advocacy efforts for the field of librarianship. What she heard, overwhelmingly, was a desire to measure the impact of early literacy storytimes on the children who attended them. While librarians have known for some time that storytimes and early exposure to books and reading are important and beneficial for children, there had been very little research in this area (Campana et al., 2016).

Background on Research
With this knowledge, and the findings from a planning meeting in which stakeholders, representing the worlds of both research and practice, discussed important aspects of early literacy, Dr. Dresang and her team developed the research design, questions, and methodology for the four-year, IMLS-funded study known as Project VIEWS2. At the end of the first year, which became known as the baseline study, researchers found that there was a correlation between the behaviors employed by storytime providers in the delivery of their programs, and the observable early literacy behaviors of the children who were in the audience, and that early literacy storytimes were making a difference for the children who attended them (2016).

During the second year of the study, subsequently referred to as the quasi-experimental study, researchers wanted to know whether they could increase that impact with training. An intervention was designed in which a randomly selected group of librarians were provided with information about child development and the basics of early literacy, as well as the tools that had been used by the VIEWS2 researchers. The librarians were then asked to choose one or two behaviors to try out in their storytime planning. The researchers delivered intervention content through three online webinars, providing time in between each webinar for independent discovery as well as time during the webinars themselves for community-building and peer feedback. Following the intervention, the researchers returned to the field to conduct a second round of data collection from libraries participating in the study.

At the end of the second year, the researchers found that the intervention had made a difference in the number of early literacy behaviors observed in the content of storytime programs and in the behaviors of the children who attended them, thus demonstrating that a purposeful focus on incorporating early literacy principles into the planning of storytime programs does make a difference in both the content of the program and in children's early literacy learning (Mills et al., under review). Furthermore, librarians could use the research-based tools of VIEWS2 for planning and reflection on their programs. These findings directly impacted and influenced practice: librarians, storytime providers, and administrators could now point to this research to demonstrate that the work they did had a positive effect on the communities they served. The next step was to find a way to make this new approach a part of professional practice.

Supercharged Storytimes
That is where Supercharged Storytimes comes in. Supercharged Storytimes, a phrase coined by Diane Hutchins, Early Learning Consultant at the Washington State Library, is a research-based program of online orientations developed by OCLC and the VIEWS2 research team, and is based on the training that was part of the intervention delivered to participants in the VIEWS2 research study. The program is designed to encourage storytime providers to be intentional and interactive when they include early literacy content in their storytimes, and to help build a peer-to-peer community of practice. When storytimes are supercharged, practitioners have the confidence that comes with knowing that their storytimes are making a difference in children's early literacy learning and that they are an important part of the learning ecosystem for children. With a solid foundation and understanding of child development and early literacy, practitioners also feel equipped to articulate the impact of their programs to managers, directors, and funders. In addition, those who have learned how to supercharge their storytimes have found them to be fun, creative, energizing, and successful!

Supercharged Storytimes emphasizes the three principles of intentionality, interactivity, and community of practice. Part of the planning process for a Supercharged Storytime includes using the VIEWS2 Planning Tool (VPT) to embed early literacy content into storytimes. The VPT suggests behaviors across 8 different early literacy domains (Alphabetic Knowledge, Communication, Comprehension, Language Use, Phonological Awareness, Print Concepts, Vocabulary, Writing Concepts) that can be incorporated into storytime activities to intentionally support early literacy. It is important to note that the VPT is just a starting place or a guide. It is not a comprehensive list of everything librarians can do to encourage early literacy. Rather, it is a resource to help give librarians a basic understanding of the VPT and help to make them more comfortable with trying new ways to incorporate early literacy into their storytime activities. The VPT features two columns: one for adult behaviors and one for children's behaviors. The adult behaviors are those that librarians would incorporate into the delivery of their storytimes. The corresponding children's behaviors are those that librarians should eventually see the children demonstrating in response to their own behaviors.

You may wonder why we need Supercharged Storytimes if we already have the well-known and widespread ALA program, Every Child Ready to Read @ your library, 2nd edition, (ECRR2). Supercharged Storytimes and ECRR are separate, but complementary, programs. While ECRR focuses on parents and caregivers and how librarians can support their learning, Supercharged Storytimes focuses specifically on librarians, their storytimes, and their professional growth. (See Figure 1). It also places an emphasis on the children and their early literacy outcomes and how librarians can use those outcomes to plan and develop more effective storytimes. Supercharged Storytimes is meant to complement ECRR2 by helping librarians understand how to be intentional about incorporating the early literacy skills of ECRR1 into the five practices of ECRR2 (Campana, Ghoting, & Mills, 2016). By using the VPT to plan their programs, practitioners can be intentional about incorporating early literacy content into the talking, reading, singing, playing, and writing that make up their storytimes. The VPT also helps storytime practitioners understand how their own activities support early literacy. This instills them with new-found confidence and the ability to verbalize to parents and caregivers what they are doing and why they are doing it. It is not enough to tell parents and caregivers to talk, read, sing, play, and write with their children. To truly make a difference in children's early literacy learning, practitioners need to model and explain to parents and caregivers HOW they can use the five practices in their interactions with their children to achieve maximize the benefits of talking, reading, singing, playing, and writing in the development of early literacy skills.

Figure 1: VIEWS2, the VPT, and ECRR (Campana, Mills, & Ghoting, 2016).

Intentionality and Interactivity
As we mentioned previously, Supercharged Storytimes emphasizes the principles of intentionality, interactivity, and community. Before supercharging their storytimes, practitioners need to understand how these principles can be applied to practice. We demonstrated how to do this in our PNLA workshop by employing a multimedia, interactive approach using videos and hands-on activities to extend and deepen the learning.

Intentionality means being mindful when planning storytimes, being purposeful about including early literacy in planning and reflection, and offering early literacy tips to caregivers as part of storytimes. The practitioner can use the VPT to choose an early literacy behavior on which to focus, then incorporate it into a song or a story in storytime, and then observe the behaviors of the children who are attending that storytime. In time, they will see that the children are responding to the early literacy behaviors that they utilize during storytime. This is what is meant by the word "intentional." Keep in mind that it may take several repetitions to allow for differing rates of development among the children who come to library storytimes.

Three videos, featuring librarians from the VIEWS2 study covering the early literacy areas of vocabulary, phonological awareness, and alphabetic knowledge, help to demonstrate the concept of intentionality. In these videos (http://views2.ischool.uw.edu), the librarians discuss and demonstrate how they incorporate various behaviors from the VPT into storytime activities. At the PNLA workshop, prior to moving into small groups to practice working with the tools, we emphasized the following key points regarding alphabetic knowledge:

- This is an area where we saw significant change during our study. Librarians can incorporate all kinds of alphabetic knowledge behaviors into their storytime activities and help children learn their letters. We call it Exploring with Letters.
- Alphabetic knowledge is about more than just the alphabet song. Librarians can help children begin to distinguish print from art by pointing to the print on a page in a book or in some kind of environmental print, such as signs, etc.
- Librarians can even bring in some STEM concepts by pointing out the shapes of letters-- how some are pointy, some are round, some letters repeat shapes, etc.
- Librarians can plan their programs by looking at the VPT and decide what behaviors they want to emphasize, then incorporate those and watch the children over the next few storytimes repeat those behaviors. In time, the librarians will see their young storytime audience display behaviors that correspond to the behaviors they have integrated into their storytimes. Practitioners can also decide if they want to help the children demonstrate certain behaviors and then plan their storytime accordingly to help elicit those literacy behaviors in the children through their own behaviors.

A discussion then followed on how to be interactive in the delivery of storytimes. Storytimes historically have not been about interactivity—instead, they were performance-oriented. Children were expected to sit and listen and absorb the content. But in recent times, storytimes have been transformed. Interactivity provides a variety of ways for children to interact with, and participate in, storytime content and can feature activities that typically make up a storytime, such as songs, books, fingerplays, etc. By sharing stories and discussing book themes, children can help librarians with storytimes! According to Erica Delavan, a Children's Services Librarian at the Seattle Public Library, involving the children in storytime is important and beneficial for them: "Whenever I can, I have the children help me tell the story. It improves a lot of their early literacy skills--their narrative skills, their vocabulary--and we are trying to build those skills before they start school" (Campana, Mills, & Ghoting, 2016, p. 7).

Interactivity also keeps children engaged. It helps them to see that they are part of the program and that their opinion is important. It also helps the practitioner to be aware of what the children at their program can do and what can be done to help them do more. Dialogic reading (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003) focuses on the conversation between adult and child during a reading event. When an adult reads with a child, the adult can ask questions and extend the child's answers, enhancing the child's vocabulary and understanding of the text, as well as providing an interactive experience. Scaffolding is also part of interactivity: practitioners can provide opportunities for children to build on what they already know and learn new concepts. But first, practitioners need to have an understanding of where the children are in their learning. When interactivity is employed in storytimes, the librarian is able to gain a better understanding of what children attending that storytime know and what they can do.

Hands-on Activity
For the hands-on portion of the workshop, we invited participants to get into groups and choose a behavior from the VIEWS2 planning tool to incorporate into a chosen storytime activity. We provided a wide variety of picture books as possible sources of inspiration. The groups discussed creative ways to incorporate behaviors in various ways: by looking first at children's indicators and then planning their own behaviors; or by looking at their own behaviors and planning for what they wanted to see in the children. It bears repeating that the tool is a starting point, not an end point. This cannot be emphasized enough. Supercharged Storytimes encourages individuality and creativity. The approach is to guide, rather than to prescribe, ways to incorporate intentionality and interactivity into storytimes.

Playing and Writing in Storytime
In the VIEWS2 study, we did not see many examples of playing and writing in our observations, though admittedly this could be because we used a very narrow definition of what we meant by

"storytime" for the purposes of the study. We know that play is how children learn and how they explore and discover their world. In storytimes, we can use these tools to scaffold those learning experiences through play. Through play, children can develop not only their vocabulary and executive function abilities, but also their oral language, narrative, and problem-solving skills. By using intentionality to purposefully include play and playtime in storytimes, librarians can build in interactivity by encouraging children to participate and interact in the program. By incorporating dialogic practices in unstructured playtime, librarians can ask children to talk about their play, such as describing the buildings they have constructed during block play.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of play, structured and unstructured, that can be incorporated into storytimes. In one storytime we observed, the librarian led the children in a group pretend play activity in which they made a pumpkin pie, using gestures and onomatopoeia and rich vocabulary to stimulate their imaginations. This is an example of a structured play activity that enables children of all ages to participate and learn through play. The younger ones can watch the older ones and, with repetition, the librarian enables even more children to participate and enjoy the activity. Bubbles, or parachutes, or dancing are also examples of structured play activities with guidelines and objectives. Unstructured play, on the other hand, is open-ended, allowing children to develop their own rules and guidelines. It can take many forms. An open playtime can precede or follow the storytime, with a variety of toys and objects like blocks that children can use to work through what they are learning and discovering. Caregivers and families can be encouraged to get down on the floor and play with their children, letting the children lead the play but facilitating that co-play between the child and the caregiver.

Writing is another crucial, integral part of children's literacy development that can, and should, be incorporated into storytime. Whether it's a simple scribble on a nametag or a perfectly printed name, writing develops fine motor skills and writing readiness. During storytime, librarians can begin the process of writing readiness by including activities that focus on writing. These activities can follow a progression:
- Developing gross and fine motor skills;
- Progressing to scribbling and developing an understanding that print is different from pictures and that it communicates an idea;
- Identifying letters and writing letter-like shapes; and
- Writing actual letters.

It is important to keep in mind, though, that all children progress at their own rate and in their own way. What does writing look like for babies? One librarian in our study mentioned drawing letters on babies' tummies. The baby is not going to know if it is an A or a P, but the parents and caregivers are interacting with their baby, giving the baby attention and touch, and the baby knows that. Because part of this activity is helping to develop the bond between parent and baby, writing activities for that age can just be about touch and tracing. At an older age, children can draw with imaginary paint in the air.

Hands-on Activity
In the hands-on activity, we discussed how to be intentional and interactive with play and writing in storytime so that the audience could understand how to incorporate these activities in a more effective manner. Participants engaged in a group activity, pretending to paint a letter in the air after first picking their own paint color. This activity demonstrated how writing can be incorporated even in large groups in an intentional, interactive way. Participants later discussed in groups various ways to incorporate play and writing into storytimes, using behaviors related to vocabulary and writing concepts. As was evident in our research intervention, having hands-on time to try out the tools and brainstorm ideas is an effective way to reinforce the supercharged approach in planning and delivering storytimes with intentionality.

Assessment

The last part of the workshop focused on the final year of VIEWS2, which was known as the assessment study. While we understand that many practitioners are reluctant or scared to participate in assessment, we want to be clear that assessment does not have to be scary! The storytime providers that we worked with shared that, overall, their experience with assessment has been really positive and rewarding and has helped to improve their storytimes. When we talk about assessment, we are referring to a process that can be used to understand the impact of storytimes to discover what worked well and what did not. When librarians hone their skills by gaining the information they need from their storytime community and community of peers, they can develop more effective storytimes that better meet the needs of the children and families that attend them.

The assessment study, in which researchers conducted 35 interviews with librarians and administrators to understand the landscape of storytime assessment in Washington state, revealed that there were four main approaches to assessing storytimes in libraries: self-reflection, peer mentoring, evaluations by administrators, and feedback from parents/caregivers (Mills et al., 2015). Many storytime providers shared that self-reflection and peer mentoring were the most useful assessment methods for helping them grow in their practice as storytime providers and developing more effective storytime practices. It is because of this that we recommend storytime providers use self-reflection and peer mentoring when working through the Supercharged Storytimes process. Neither self-reflection nor peer mentoring should be used in a formal, prescriptive way. In fact, the researchers found that most storytime providers were not using self-reflection and peer mentoring in a formal manner. Instead, most of them have developed informal ways to reflect on their storytimes and gain feedback from their peers.

Self-reflection, which uses intentionality to review storytime content and the impact that it has on the children and the families that come to those programs, was the most common type of storytime assessment that we found. Storytime providers that were interviewed for the study reflected on their storytimes in many different ways. Each had their own personal method of self-reflection, which they found worked best for their storytime practice. These methods ranged from taking a few minutes to think about how everything went following their storytime, to a more structured note-taking process after each storytime—how their storytimes went, what they would change or keep in future storytimes. Many storytime providers shared that their self-reflection process was just done mentally but some reported using worksheets or writing up notes to help support their self-reflection. Even though their methods were diverse, most of the storytime providers reflected on the behaviors of their storytime attendees to help them understand the success of their storytimes. One of the key benefits was that storytime providers were using the information they got from self-reflection to make changes to their future storytimes in the hope of making them more effective.

Peer mentoring was another type of assessment that practitioners reported using frequently to gain feedback and ideas for their storytimes. By peer mentoring, we mean building relationships and networks with other storytime providers that can be used as a source for ideas and feedback on storytime practice. As had been the case with self-reflection, storytime providers were using a wide variety of methods for peer mentoring. Some of the more common methods included structured peer mentoring systems where peer storytime providers observed each other's storytimes and engaged in a conversation based on the observation, providing feedback and ideas. Other storytime providers used more informal methods including spontaneous, brief observations with feedback, or spontaneous, informal discussions between peers around storytime activities and ideas. With the more structured process, storytime providers reported using worksheets to support the process. However, when using more informal methods, they tended to not use any formal tools, instead relying on spontaneous, casual conversations. One of the key benefits of peer mentoring was that storytime providers were able to get an outsider's view of their storytimes, gaining both feedback and new ideas to put into practice.

Hands-on Activity

To give the PNLA conference workshop participants an opportunity to be intentional about developing assessment strategies, we provided opportunities to practice self-reflection and peer mentoring. First, the audience participated in an individual activity in which they reviewed a worksheet for self-reflection and then thought about their own practice. What would they change or do differently? How did the worksheet fit, or not fit, with their current practice? The participants then went back into their groups and discussed how they might take advantage of peer mentoring opportunities in their libraries, either with their own colleagues or with peer professionals in the community. They then examined the peer mentoring worksheet in their packets and discussed how the questions fit with what they were already doing or ways in which this assessment method might help them expand their practice.

Community

Finally, it is in the peer mentoring and peer interactions (the third principle of Supercharged Storytimes) that we see the important role of community. Community, within the context of Supercharged Storytimes, is about building a group of peers to facilitate the sharing of ideas, provide a forum where questions can be asked and solutions suggested, and encouraging feedback on storytime practices. The ability to share with others and to observe the storytimes of peers can generate new perspectives, disseminate new ideas, suggest novel ways of solving problems encountered in storytimes, and provide a means for those who have been helped to give back to the community. For those who do not currently have a community of peers available to them, alternatives may be found within their library, library system, or in the online community. Those fortunate enough to have a community already in place should be sure to make the time to share their own storytime for feedback, and observe others, setting aside time dedicated to a discussion of storytime practices. Peer interactions are crucial to the future of the profession because we grow and improve when we share and learn from each other.

The Big Picture

Finally, we want to quickly take a look at how all of this fits together and forms an iterative cycle of storytime design. (See Figure 2). As we mentioned earlier, a Supercharged Storytime begins with planning in which the practitioner is intentional and is interactive in integrating early literacy content into the program. Next comes delivery of the storytime, again intentional and interactive. This planning and delivery process then informs the next planning and delivery process, becoming an iterative cycle that is also informed by self-reflection and peer mentoring (the assessment processes that we presented). The planning and delivery from past cycles, along with information gathered from self-reflection and peer mentoring, inform the planning and delivery of future cycles. This iterative cycle of having the planning and delivery of storytimes informed by self-reflection and peer mentoring processes helps the practitioner to consistently provide storytimes that are Supercharged and more effective for the children and families attending.

Figure 2: The iterative process of storytime design (Campana, Mills, & Ghoting, 2016)

Conclusion

The findings of Project VIEWS2, and their translation into practice through Supercharged Storytimes, have far-reaching implications for practitioners and administrators in public libraries. We now have the research that demonstrates that storytimes really do make a difference in children's early literacy abilities; we have developed a training using research-based tools that encourages librarians to be more intentional in their planning and interactive in their delivery; and we have a mechanism to build a community of peers to help storytime practitioners grow in their practice. Self-reflection on one's own practice and reaching out to peers to share information and provide constructive feedback can instill confidence in staff who provide storytime programs and help them to supercharge their storytimes to better serve families and their young children.

Supplementary Resources

VIEWS2 website - http://views2.ischool.uw.edu
OCLC Supercharged Storytimes Archive: https://www.webjunction.org/news/webjunction/supercharged-archive-available.html
Dialogic Practices:
http://community.fpg.unc.edu/connect-modules/resources/handouts/CONNECT-Handout-6-3.pdf/view
http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/earlylit/books_for_dialogic.pdf

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