



## Telling stories in class: an exploration of aspects of the use of narrative in a higher education context

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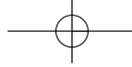


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### **Summary**

*This article explores some of the ways in which reading and writing stories can be used by staff and students in higher education. It discusses when and why the story form might be useful and conversely why, in certain circumstances, it might be unhelpful. It explores the use of fiction and poetry in learning and teaching contexts with students who are engaged in professional education courses. Examples are given from a current, funded research project where students write stories using a different perspective than their own. The potential for reflecting on practice and for transformative learning is identified. Suggestions are made for future cross-university collaboration on the use of this story approach.*





### Introduction

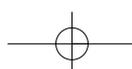
*It was the last day of term. One hundred and fifty students were in the lecture theatre for the final session before the start of the holiday. The lecturer had carefully prepared a PowerPoint presentation using both text and pictures. The lecturer started the session. Many of the students started writing. They were writing Christmas cards that were then passed around and opened by others. Smiles of acknowledgement were given. The lecturer felt separated from the students. She stopped and walked in front of the desk. "I want to tell you a story," she said. The students stopped what they were doing. They looked at the lecturer. She started telling a story about an example of workplace practice related to the topic of the lecture. The silence in the room was intense. All the students listened attentively. At the end of the story the lecturer went back to her PowerPoint slides and the students went back to their Christmas cards.*

This type of scenario may not be entirely unfamiliar to colleagues working in a higher education context. As lecturers we often use stories in class: from anecdotes and small vignettes to case studies from practice. We may find that students attend to, and engage with, these stories. Why do we tell them and why do students listen? Do we ask them to tell stories? If so, how is this supporting their learning? The use of different forms of narrative in research, for both data collection and data presentation, has expanded rapidly during the past ten years as researchers using qualitative approaches have become more confident with a range of creative approaches (Lyons and LaBoskey, 2002). At the same time, some lecturers are using forms of storytelling in their teaching. This article explores some of the ways stories can be used in higher education, with evidence drawn from a current, funded research project.

### Why story?

The use of the story in the previous scenario had not been planned, but was an intuitive response to a particular context. It could be argued, of course, that the students' changed listening behaviour was less a positive response to the story than reaction against an over familiar PowerPoint lecture format that can lack personal engagement. Telling a story can allow a lecturer to get closer to the students, both physically and metaphorically. It can lessen the distance between the teacher and the learner. It may allow us to reveal part of ourselves, either because we include ourselves as characters, or because we show personal perspectives on events. When we tell stories, our verbal and non-verbal communication changes, making language easier to understand. Bruner (1990) has argued that we learn about the social world most easily in narrative form and it is often how we recall, recount and anticipate experience. Even if we are not teaching about the social world we may nevertheless choose to link our paradigmatic content with fables, metaphors or social world examples in order to provide students with a link to more abstract concepts. As narrative is a use of language that is traditional, learnt from a young age and easily memorable, it may be more accessible to learners than ideas presented in propositional form. Putting complex ideas into an easier, more familiar genre could be seen as supporting inclusive teaching practice.

Stories can also lead to active learning on the part of the student. In the traditional lecture format I was using at the beginning of my unsuccessful teaching session described at the start of this paper, I was the person who was identifying key information. In relation to the story, however, it was the students who had to infer the meaning of the text. Adults, and indeed children, expect there to be a message or a point to a story and actively look for this. They also understand the metaphorical role of stories and while responding





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to them personally, they do not limit their interpretations to the particular example. They may make generalisations from stories and use these to generate their own stories. However, there can be both limitations and dangers inherent in the process. One of the questions we need to ask is 'which stories are we telling?'

### **Which stories?**

One of the reasons that the students in the scenario at the beginning of this article listened to the story may have been because it was about professional practice in which they were shortly to engage. Hearing stories about practice is one of the ways we learn about it, and students who are about to undertake some form of work-based experience are likely to be motivated by stories of this type. As lecturers we often take an aspect or principle of practice and contextualise it. We show how a situated issue or dilemma may look and give examples of strategies to deal with it. One difficulty is, of course, if the example is remembered rather than the principle it is designed to illustrate. We need to be aware that students need insights into the range of contextual factors that influence practice. If only one example is storied or if influences framing everyone's stories are not highlighted, the students may reject the story, thinking it would not work in their situation and therefore also reject the underlying principles.

Stories about 'how we do things here' are one form of induction into a profession and into a workplace. Students can learn the language and procedures of their chosen field from stories told by lecturers. They can also see how professionals in a particular area engage with the ideas in a practice context, how they reflect on their own work and enquire into their practice. One danger with

workplace stories, however, is that they can perpetuate forms of practice without challenging them: for example, they can lead to a lack of resistance to, or failure to identify, discriminatory practices. In most professional contexts only certain sorts of story would be acceptable. Mattingly (1991), researching stories told by people implementing a World Bank project, found that only stories related to a particular political agenda could be told. In schools, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) identified 'sacred stories' told by managers, 'cover stories' told by teachers to demonstrate to colleagues and managers how they responded to the sacred stories, and finally 'secret stories' acted out by teachers in their own classrooms and shared with a few trusted colleagues. The status of stories could, of course, change, if new ideas and policies developed. Secret stories could then change from possible resistance to the sacred story, to becoming part of a new sacred story. So, for example, a teacher might have a secret story of undertaking some cross-curricular work in teaching at a time when the sacred story was about subject teaching. If, at a later date, the sacred story advocated making links between subjects, the teacher's practice would become part of that story. Students need to be aware of the range of stories that may be told and whose stories they are.

### **Whose stories?**

Lecturers will often tell stories of examples of their own practice or professional work they have recently observed. This may be partly to show that they are not as remote from the 'real world' as students may imagine, but is often to identify what they consider to be good practice. This may include approaches or methods that they would wish students to emulate. A danger, of course, is that these stories may then





conflict with those told by practitioners when students attend work-based placements – what could be characterised as a ‘real world’ versus ‘ivory tower’ conflict. Rather than wanting to protect students from what we believe to be the ‘wrong’ stories, we need to give them tools to examine stories: ours, theirs and those of other people. We need to help them to view these stories through different lenses; to identify their cultural and institutional assumptions; and to apply different theoretical models to the examples of practice. Stories need to be analysed, both in discussion with staff and peers and in relation to appropriate literature, as this supports the development of critical reflective practice.

The ‘storying’ of experience in the field of professional development is increasing (Bolton, 2001; McDrury and Alterio, 2003). Professionals, or students in a particular field, are encouraged to write storied accounts of examples of practice both for themselves and, often, to share in groups. Burchell and Dyson (2000), for example, undertook an action research project with lecturers in higher education who were reflecting on their practice in relation to dissertation supervision. As part of this process each lecturer wrote a story, in whatever form they wished, about their experience of supervising dissertations. While the participants were surprised to be asked to write in this format in an academic context, they were able to do so. As we all tell stories in everyday life there is no mystery about the writing form. Participants found that the writing process itself allowed for reflection and self-discovery, while sharing stories with other people enabled them to see different perspectives on current concerns.

Concerns, issues and dilemmas may be unconscious and may be revealed through the story writing process. Practical knowledge is

situated and developed in action. Stories are about actions, but are not the actions themselves. They are constructions in which there is foregrounding of particular elements, interpretation of events and implied intentions, motivations and anxieties. The story writing process, which is descriptive not analytic, may in this way raise awareness of intuitive practice so that it can be examined. Story influences may remain tacit, but can nevertheless result in changed practice because if much professional action takes place in relation to tacit knowledge then changing this knowledge could result in the development of practice. This change can come about by experiencing resonance or dissonance in relation to stories.

Resonance can be experienced when we hear or read a story that ‘speaks to us’ cognitively or emotionally. Stories generally involve emotion, an element that may be limited in academic discussion of practice but that is frequently present in action. We could experience an ‘echo’ (Conle, 1996) between a story and our own experience or, as we imagine the other’s story, we may respond kinaesthetically or ‘feel with’ them (Sarbin, 2004). Our response will be individual and the resonance may be unrelated to the particular detail of the story. While this resonance could simply confirm our own story, it may well alter it subtly and our thinking process may ‘move’ to involve new contexts, or internalise a wider and deeper understanding of our original perceptions (Conle, 1996). Although this could result in changing our actions in professional practice, dissonance between stories could also have this effect. A perceived conflict between a story and our own understanding can be a catalyst for change (Golembek and Johnson, 2004). If our engagement with the story involves emotion, so that it matters to us, we may be stimulated to resolve the





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contradiction by reconceptualising our ideas. Alternatively, of course, we may find this too threatening and reject the story. A key issue for lecturers using story in a professional development context is that, while the personal nature of the response to the story is essential for changing individual perspectives and for giving people the potential for choosing to change practice, these private responses may be hidden from the lecturer. If changes are subconscious, they may indeed be hidden from the students themselves. This is problematic for professional development where lecturers have responsibility for developing ethical practice. Personally held beliefs in relation to race, gender or disability, for example, will impact on professional practice and need to be 'surfaced' (Schon, 1983) so that they can be reflected on. Dialogue with peers and lecturers around stories of practice allow for an understanding of different perspectives and for an understanding of how our own stories have developed in personal and cultural contexts. A danger may be, however, that a discussion group is too homogeneous to be able to see beyond particular professional or cultural frames and minority views may be silenced by the group context. The use of fiction can be a way of approaching these issues.

### **What about fiction and poetry?**

Staff and students can present examples of practice in fictional form which may help authors to distance themselves from personally sensitive material, particularly if it is to be discussed with others. It will also help deal with ethical issues inherent in discussion of examples of professional practice. Social workers, for example, have used Harry Potter to explore notions of appropriate parenting and the ways in which decisions are made about

supporting children and families (Seden, 2002). This reduces the potential for people feeling personally criticised, but can allow them to take on new ideas and perspectives. Harry Potter stories are also used in other forms of professional practice. Business students, for example, can look at management in relation to a range of personalities at 'Hogwarts' and at issues of knowledge management in this setting (Herman, 2004). This has the benefit of engaging students through humour. Additionally, by analysing examples not normally associated with their professional practice, students may be able to identify the principles underlying this practice more clearly. Fictionalising practice can also help the author to look at different viewpoints if a range of voices is included in the telling. Hearing the voices of clients, patients, or students, for example, can lead to more informed practice. This may also be possible through talking with or interviewing people, but may be problematic in contexts of unequal power relationships.

Reading published fictional texts can be a way of gaining simulated experience including understanding the perspectives of other people. Stories, from Greek tragedies to tales exploring current issues of cultural difference, have been used to carry messages about understanding the 'other' (Nassbaum, 1997). Through imagination and attenuated role-taking, readers can empathise with people who may be seen as different from themselves (Sarbin, 2004). Perceptions gained from fiction can result in a changed understanding of others which could lead to readers deciding to take different action in the real world (Gerrig, 1993). For this reason Coles (1989) used fictional texts involving doctors to explore experiences and roles in medical contexts and he was particularly concerned that doctors should develop a 'moral imagination' in relation





to understanding the perceptions of patients. This was seen as contributing to more sensitive and effective professional practice.

A key issue in the use of fiction is that cultural assumptions exist within the form of the story as well as its content. Different cultures will have different 'storying' conventions and if not appreciated and shared, then this type of work can lead to misunderstandings. This is particularly true in relation to poetry. Poetry can be evocative and emotionally engaging and, as it does not necessarily denote a particular example, it can be less overtly challenging than an account of practice, thereby limiting the possibility of hostility or rejection. Poetry may be particularly relevant in work contexts where emotional issues need to be explored. However, as noted in a previous edition of this journal (Roberts, 2004), the language of lectures and seminars includes vocabulary, allusions and examples that are culture-specific and this is exacerbated when poetry and metaphors are used. While metaphors can allow us to see things in new ways and lead to conceptual understanding, they can also lead to misunderstanding if, for example, one of the categories used is not understood in the same way by all participants. For example, if a person or institution is referred to as 'a rock', the understanding of this concept will depend on perceptions and experiences of 'rock' which could include 'solid' or 'hard' or alternatively 'likely to be undermined' if the concept is linked to rocks being eroded by the sea.

#### **A current research project using story**

Over the last two years the School of Education has undertaken a research project exploring the use of reading and writing fiction and poetry in developing student teachers' understanding and knowledge in the field of special educational needs. Initially the project

was funded by the University's Learning and Teaching Development Fund and it is currently supported by the Teacher Training Agency. A reason for using a story approach in this area of education is ably demonstrated by a recently published and widely read novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* (Haddon, 2003). The story is told from the perspective of a young person with Asperger's Syndrome and shows how fiction can help people understand the ways in which a child with this condition may experience the world and the reasons for particular behaviour. While a condition such as Asperger's Syndrome can be explained factually, the fictionalisation embeds the information in a context and leads to a level of emotional engagement and empathy on the part of the reader. One aim of the research project was to use the strengths of story to help student teachers understand pupil perspectives and thereby be enabled, potentially, to take more appropriate action in the classroom.

#### **Learning/Teaching approach**

For a final-year module, education students have read fiction, poetry, autobiographies, information texts and websites on an individually chosen disability, such as deafness or autism, and have then written stories or poems, supported by images, from the perspective of, and in the voice of, a child with that condition. While the module is primarily undertaken through self-study, students are supported by staff-led sessions exploring the use of words and images as forms of representation, and by peer group reflective work. Students are also required to keep reflective logs charting the development of their project and their thinking. The students' stories and logs are used as evidence of learning for assessment purposes, while evidence from





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questionnaires completed by all the participants and interviews from a proportion of students help the research team to analyse course outcomes. Further details of the project can be found in Jarvis et al (2004).

### Outcomes

Students engaged wholeheartedly with the project, perhaps in part due to its novelty factor. Transformative outcomes in relation to student perspectives were identified. Students' work demonstrated resonant and dissonant aspects as they developed their stories and related them to their previous understanding in the field. They began to see children with special educational needs as being part of the group of all children, not 'other' and not defined by their often problematic behaviour. The students also recognised conflict between what they had thought was their own good practice as teachers and it being identified as exclusive or patronising when they looked at it from a child's perspective. Seeing teachers through the eyes of pupils gave students a disconcerting, but potentially empowering, different view of themselves. Through stories they were also able to portray teachers using both appropriate and inappropriate classroom strategies in relation to their fictional child selves. The potential exists, therefore, for the use of the more appropriate strategies once the students start work in their own classrooms. Some students were enabled to see a wider perspective beyond the school, and articulated their commitment to working to end the educational and social discrimination against people with disabilities. All students reported that they had been changed in some way by the course. "We now see things differently," reported one student. What they saw differently varied between individuals and future development of this work will include more opportunities for students to share their insights.

### Future work

The research project will continue in the next academic year with work being undertaken on different, shorter courses for student teachers where less time is available for exploring special educational needs. We will again aim to exploit the potential of story to effect change, so will continue to ask students to read and write fiction, but will include subsequent organised discussion of these stories with staff and peers. We will be using personal-construct psychology methods to identify changes in student perspectives following the project. In the development of the project we will be aiming to share insights with others engaged in similar work and with those using story approaches in a range of education contexts. In this way we hope to understand more about the use of story in helping to develop student, and indeed staff, learning.

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#### Biographical notes

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