

Using storytelling to enhance student learning

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Summary

This article promotes storytelling as a way to enhance student learning. It begins with reasons for storytelling's current popularity as a teaching and learning tool, then suggests how educators and students can work together to create a storytelling culture. Different types of stories and processes are considered and a storytelling activity is provided before the role of reflective dialogue is explored. To conclude, benefits for students who learn through storytelling are outlined.

Biography

Maxine Alterio currently works in the area of staff development at Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand. In her research she focuses on how formalised storytelling processes can be used to advance professional practice. She is also a prize winning short story writer with work published in literary magazines, journals and edited collections. Many of her stories have also been broadcast on radio.

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Keywords

Communication, knowledge, learning, storytelling culture, subjective and objective views, ethical issues, spontaneous and pre-determined stories, reflective processing, cultural and emotional realities, reflective dialogue and collaborative endeavours.

Why encourage students to learn through stories?

Storytelling is a powerful and enduring means of communication that has widespread appeal. It crosses cultures and communities; in fact, many of our earliest learning experiences most likely involved stories, some told to us directly, others read and, still more, played out around us. Even before we had the ability to articulate what we knew, felt and thought, we learned to make sense of our world through stories.

Although educators have always used storytelling, until recently these stories often occurred spontaneously and were not considered integral to learning and teaching activities. The perception in some quarters was that storytelling was lightweight, soft, not a real learning tool. As a consequence, stories tended to have a narrow focus and were frequently used to:

- convey information;
- express views;
- share experiences;
- entertain;
- connect with others.

In recent years, the reflective movement has done much to advance the notion that we each carry within us creative learning capabilities. Storytelling is one of these capabilities and when it is used in thoughtful, reflective and formalised ways, significant learning is possible (Clandinin and Connelly, 1998; McDrury and Alterio, 2002; McEwan and Egan, 1995; Pendlebury, 1995; and Witherell and Nodding, 1991). When educators support students to share and process their practice experiences in these ways, storytelling can:

- encourage co-operative activity;
- encompass holistic perspectives;
- value emotional realities;
- link theory to practice;
- stimulate students' critical thinking skills;
- capture complexities of situations;
- reveal multiple perspectives;
- make sense of experience;
- encourage self review;
- construct new knowledge.

Storytelling is an ideal teaching and learning tool, for it takes seriously the need for students to make sense of experience, using their own culturally generated sense-making processes (Bishop and Glynn, 1999). Storytelling also has the capacity to support and enhance the relationship between students creating new knowledge and learning from others. In addition, sharing and reflectively processing stories provides students with opportunities to develop authentic relationships with their peers.

As a culturally situated, collaborative and reflective learning and teaching tool, storytelling addresses the concern many educators have about how to encourage students to integrate feeling and thought, the subjective and objective ways in which we make judgements about our world (Beatty, 2000; and Mulligan, 1993). However, storytelling does come with its own set of challenges because using reflective processes to learn from experience can be challenging and does raise a number of ethical issues. It is, therefore, imperative for educators and students to consider what forms of support are needed before embarking on storytelling activities. Creating a supportive storytelling culture is essential.

How can a storytelling culture be created?

Shifting storytelling from an entertainment or educator-controlled activity to a robust mode of student inquiry requires thoughtful consideration. While some students will feel comfortable from the onset, others may need time and assistance to use this tool confidently. How educators promote and use storytelling will impact on how students perceive its value. It is also worth noting that different activities will appeal to different students. Oral, written, visual and physical stories are all possible options (McDrury and Alterio, 2002). Prior to introducing storytelling processes and activities, it is prudent for educators to consider questions such as:

- Is storytelling the most compelling and memorable way for this group of students to learn about this topic and if so, why?
- What form of storytelling best suits these students' learning needs?
- What outcomes do I want this group of students to achieve?
- Will these outcomes be assessed, and if so, how?
- What forms of support are needed?
- How can confidentiality and anonymity issues be addressed?

Support, confidentiality and anonymity issues

When students tell and process their practice-related stories, they may experience strong emotions such as anger, frustration or sadness. While such emotions may be central to the students' current stories, they can also be connected to past and perhaps unresolved experiences. If emotional aspects become overwhelming and beyond the educator's capability to manage, it is essential that students have access to appropriate support such as trained counsellors. Students who listen to stories are not immune to emotional reactions either. Sometimes tellers' stories connect with listeners' experiences and trigger emotional reactions or unresolved aspects that also need addressing.

It is also important that students learn how to protect the key players in their stories. Issues such as confidentiality and anonymity can be addressed through co-negotiated ground rules. Naming key players by role rather than name, altering locations and ensuring that what is revealed in stories stays within storytelling sessions are some ways in which these issues can be managed.

Which stories have the most learning potential?

Stories come in many shapes. Spontaneous and predetermined stories are two forms (McDrury and Alterio, 2001). Spontaneous stories often occur straight after something significant, funny or frustrating has happened and tellers have an overwhelming urge to share their experience. Predetermined stories differ in that tellers have already thought about them in some way, perhaps written about them in journals or shared fragments with family or friends. These stories stay with tellers because they are unresolved, or continue to be intriguing or troublesome. Sharing this type of story is likely to bring about the biggest learning gains.

What storytelling methods can be used?

There are many ways to work with stories. The most successful incorporate some form of reflective dialogue as part of the storytelling process. Individual processes, which involve one teller and one listener, have the potential to explore experiences in depth (Alterio, 1999) while collaborative activities may provide breadth through multiple perspectives (McDrury and Alterio, 2002). Storytelling processes can involve uncomplicated, structured activities through to highly complex and academically demanding ones. When students are new to storytelling, educators may find it useful to adopt a simple, structured approach such as that outlined in the following example.

Identifying story aspects

Purpose: To identify key aspects within stories.

Group Size: This exercise works equally well with small and large groups.

Time: 45 minutes.

Resources: Nine Post-its per student and pens

Activity: The educator asks students to think of a story about their practice and to write nine different things about it, one aspect on each of their nine Post-its. After completing this task, the educator instructs students to arrange their Post-its in a diamond shape with the most important aspect of the story at the top and the least important in ninth position. Then the educator asks the students to consider the following questions.

- What is written on Post-it one?
- Is it a feeling, a place, a person or an action?
- What might the order of the other storytelling aspects signify?
- Does the ninth Post-it in some way represent what is resolved/unresolved?

After students have taken time to reflect on these questions individually, the educator asks them to form pairs. Taking a Post-it which has an aspect on it that they are happy to share, each student tells their partner a three-minute story about it. In this activity, students have control over which aspects they share and which part of the story they tell (McDrury and Alterio, 2002).

(Adapted from a diamond nine exercise designed by Sally Brown and Phil Race, 1997).

Why encourage students to process their stories reflectively?

When students reflectively process their stories, they create the possibility for change in themselves and in others. Numerous authors offer compelling and comprehensive reasons why educators should encourage students to engage in reflective dialogue (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985; Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Brookfield and Preskill, 1999; Moon, 1999; and Reason and Hawkins, 1988). Dialogue is strengthened when it focuses on lived experiences, familiar contexts and real emotions. Storytelling accommodates the inclusion of these aspects and can assist students to view their experiences from different perspectives.

Our capacity to express ourselves through narrative forms not only enables us to reshape, reassess and reconstruct particular events, it allows us to learn from discussing our experiences with individuals who may raise alternative views, suggest imaginative possibilities and ask stimulating questions (McDrury and Alterio, 2002).

What benefits does learning through storytelling have for students?

To learn through storytelling is to take seriously the human need to make meaning from experience, to communicate that meaning to others, and, in the process, learn about ourselves and the worlds in which we reside. Meaningful storytelling processes and activities incorporate opportunities for reflective dialogue, foster collaborative endeavour, nurture the spirit of inquiry and contribute to the construction of new knowledge. In addition, cultural, contextual and emotional realities can be acknowledged, valued and integrated into storytelling processes. Students who learn through telling and reflectively processing their stories develop skills that enable them to link subjective and objective perspectives, capture the complexity of experience and bring about thoughtful change to self and practice. When storytelling is used as a robust mode of inquiry, student learning is enhanced in multiple ways.

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Storytelling websites

http://www.csd.uwa.edu.au/altmodes/to_delivery/storytelling.html

<http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej16/int.html>

<http://www.educ.sfu.ca/people/faculty/kegan/MemoryIm.html>

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/%7Eramseyil/storyreference.htm>

<http://www.opc.on.ca/pubs/stories>

<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/edu/projects/storytelling>

<http://makingstories.net>

<http://storywise.com>

http://www.deakin.edu.au/edu/crt_pe/teaching/journals.htm

<http://www.dstory.com/>

<http://www.storycenter.org/>