

Storytelling grows up: using storytelling as a reflective tool in higher education

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Abstract

The necessity to provide Personal Development Planning (PDP) processes in higher education to foster skills such as reflection, leads to the danger of introducing processes that give the appearance of fulfilling the requirement of fostering reflection, but which end up being a reflection check list fostering a surface reflective approach.

The paper argues that approaches seeking to support higher cognitive thinking skills such as reflection should be grounded in a pedagogical approach such as constructivism and storytelling is proposed as an engaging and complementary approach to developing reflective thinking skills. Students tell stories about their experiences to each other every day, and this research proposes using these stories as the basis for reflective discussions. The theoretical basis for using storytelling as a reflective tool will be critiqued.

As well as arguing the theoretical basis for using storytelling, this paper will describe research which has taken a model of storytelling in higher education and developed and applied it in an on-line setting to gain a unique insight into students' experiences of the assessment process. The described research focuses on students' experiences through the stories they tell, and the resulting qualitative data is being analysed using a grounded theory approach which has allowed a number of key themes to emerge from the data. The most important of these themes are: the overwhelmingly negative impact of assessment experiences, the issues arising from asking students to tell stories by reflecting on their experiences, and the impact of using an on-line medium to elicit stories.

Introduction

Enhancing students' higher thinking skills has always been a considerable challenge in education. The Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) has re-emphasised their importance and the need to introduce tasks to foster reflective thinking and skills to enable students to learn how to learn. The emphasis is on skills needed to develop the life long learners who will effectively be able to be part of the future *learning society*. Key to this is the introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) (QAA, 2001) which encourages students to reflect on, plan for, and understand their learning independently.

However, how this is practically accomplished has been left relatively open. What the learning society is and what place learners have within it is also open to question (Barnett, 1998). In this paper, we will look at what reflection is and its place in the learning process. We will consider the pitfalls of introducing reflective tasks and argue for a Constructivist approach when applying such tasks. We will discuss the importance of storytelling and how it can be applied as a reflective tool in higher education. We will then focus on one particular application, 'StoriesAbout...' which is using storytelling as a reflective tool and discuss how students have been encouraged to reflect on and discuss their experiences of the assessment process.

Reflection – the new buzzword

The introduction of PDP has raised the level of interest in reflection in education to the point where it has become a buzzword. Reflective activities abound, but the value and purpose of reflection can easily be lost in the rush to provide these activities. It is easy to *ask*, or *require*, a student to reflect, but to ensure they do so and that they learn from that process is more difficult, especially as reflection is often viewed as an individual process.

Boud & Walker (1998) warn against a 'recipe' approach to reflection whereby students follow prescribed reflective steps and are required to reflect on demand. Checklists of questions requiring answers can turn the reflective process into one that can be memorised and applied with little thinking and result in a surface approach to reflection. This form of 'teaching' is easy to implement, but understanding the effect it has on the student is another matter. Sometimes it is all too easy to produce a detrimental effect rather than the enhancing effect expected.

However, there may be less able students who need some support to enable them to develop reflective skills. There are a number of ways in which this is being done, for example, through incorporating reflection tasks into the assignment process (Thorpe, 2000), although assessing reflection can be problematic. What is being assessed - the reflective ability, strength of subject knowledge, or a mix of both? This is even more difficult when you consider the strong emotional aspect to the reflective process: the student must be able to safely express themselves in a supportive environment where there will be no negative consequences (Boud & Walker, 1998).

There is little doubt that reflection is indeed a key component in learning. It is central to the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984); it serves to impose order on our thoughts to help bring about a resolution to a problem (Dewey, 1991); it enables a person to distance themselves and enable the wider context to be looked at in closer detail or from a different view (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985); Schön's (1983) concept of the critically reflective practitioner depends upon it; Moon (2002) draws together the literature on reflection and focuses on the common view that reflection has different stages ranging from simply noticing something (surface learning) to taking action about it (deep learning).

These are just some examples of how reflection benefits learning. To enable the reflective process to be effective we should take an approach that is firmly grounded in pedagogy. This paper argues for taking a Constructivist approach and examines how such an approach can be effective.

A Constructivist approach to reflection

A Constructivist approach to education emphasises the learner and how they construct a representation of reality through their interactions with the world and their discussions with others (Bruner, 1986). The learner is therefore encouraged to explore their world, to learn by doing, to look at things in different ways, to discuss their world view with others, and as a result, to continually transform their understanding of the world in light of these experiences. Many of our encounters with the world are not direct, our meaning and interpretation about an event is constructed through reflection on it with others. Reality is often a product of our use of language which comes into existence through sharing ideas and negotiating meaning with others.

Bruner (1986) suggests we need to encourage a situation whereby information is not presented from one dominant view, and where reflection, discussion and opposing views are able to be included in the process. Education is far more than transmitting packets of information: it shapes our thoughts and ultimately the way in which we represent and view our world. This in turn has wider implications for society as a whole and Reddy (1979) suggests that failure to see the world view of another is at the heart of many of society's problems.

When using the term reflection, it can be too easy to accept its everyday meaning of 'mirroring back' and applying this in the educational context by looking back at a particular learning task. Malins & McKillop (2005) have looked at the definitions most commonly used by students and found they corresponded to increasingly deeper levels of reflection:

- **Level 1: A review**
 - Looking back at what they did and what they had learnt.
- **Level 2: Areas for change**
 - How they could have done things differently in that particular context.
- **Level 3: Planning for change**
 - How they could improve on this for future situations.

To enable the student to engage in a more active and meaningful reflective process requires going beyond the 'reflection as a mirror' metaphor. Using a 'reflection as a lens' metaphor¹ might be more productive in the education setting. Presenting reflection in these terms might just guide students' thoughts away from the more surface definitions they commonly use to a more deeper approach to learning that involves action planning and change (Malins & McKillop, 2005). Storytelling is a tool that takes full advantage of this metaphor in its reflective processes.

¹ 'Reflection Is Not a Mirror, It's a Lens' was used by the University of British Columbia as the title of its e-Portfolios conference in 2004

Storytelling

There can be many constructive methods to support reflective thinking, however the research project referred to in this paper set out to establish whether storytelling could be used a reflective tool in higher education. Storytelling is fundamental to our everyday lives in communicating with, and understanding, the people around us and the world we live in (Schank & Abelson, 1995).

The stories we tell are more about how we experience and perceive events than about how things really are. They enable our messages and our points of view to be conveyed to the listener or reader. In stories we are less inclined to be seeking universal truths, and more inclined to be talking about intentions or possibilities. They can help us deal with unexpected situations and consider the possibilities for what could have happened as well as what actually transpired (Bruner, 1990). They are an excellent Constructivist tool, enabling us to explore the many representations of our worlds.

We can then apply knowledge from old stories to new situations to help us make sense of them. However, anomalies may occur where the knowledge from one story does not help you understand the current situation. In this case, Schank & Abelson (1995) propose that when we fail to understand we re-evaluate the situation and ask questions. Understanding that there is an anomaly, that there is something we do not know and need to know, is an important aspect of learning: it is the spark which sets off the reflective process.

Storytelling as a reflective tool in higher education

Storytelling has been extensively used in children's education as a valuable and creative tool, see for example McEwan & Egan (1995). However, its use in the higher education process has been less common and this paper proposes that storytelling can be used as an effective reflective tool in higher education. We will start by looking at some examples of the differing ways storytelling can be used.

McDonnell et al. (2004) have used video-based storytelling to encourage deeper reflective thinking with their design students. They found that the construction of stories required students to actively engage in making sense of their experiences, to present stories from different viewpoints and to reflect more deeply about the design process. Students were able to set their own goals, thus enabling them to become self-organised and independent learners.

Barrett (2004) has called for viewing electronic portfolios as 'digital stories of deep learning'. She argues against portfolios being repositories to assess learning and calls for using portfolios as assessment for learning. The portfolio would demonstrate the student's higher thinking skills through the story it conveys about their learning process. Instead of having an extrinsic motivation to construct a portfolio (i.e. for assessment), the student would be intrinsically motivated as they would be actively involved in goal setting. The student can then take ownership of the task.

One of the most interesting investigations into the use of storytelling in higher education has been by McDrury & Alterio (2003). They have proposed a five stage model of reflective learning through storytelling which they have mapped onto Moon's (2002) five stages of learning (see figure 1).

Moon	McDrury & Alterio
Noticing	Story finding
Making sense	Story telling
Making meaning	Story expanding
Working with meaning	Story processing
Transformative learning	Story reconstructing

Figure 1
Mapping onto Moon's five stages of learning

McDrury & Alterio's (2003) model considers the starting place for storytelling to be when the person first decides what story to tell. The story then has to be told, in a particular way for a particular audience. Whilst these two stages are often seen as the end of storytelling, McDrury & Alterio add further stages where the story can be expanded and processed by asking questions or focussing on important parts of the story, looking for solutions, considering similar stories or different perspectives within the story. The last stage they propose is the reconstructing stage, where solutions are critically evaluated, the implications to the individual and their practice are considered. This stage is about change.

Using storytelling in these ways enables the student to make their own decisions about what story to tell, from what viewpoint, and what they wish to convey through the story. This leads the reflective process away from being a potentially passive task, with the student simply going through the required motions to get the task done, to a process whereby the student must make informed decisions to enable their story to make sense to a particular audience.

'StoriesAbout...'

This paper focuses on one application specifically designed to gain insights into students' use of storytelling as a reflective tool (McKillop, 2004). The 'StoriesAbout...' web site (<http://www.storiesabout.com>) is based on a modified version of McDrury & Alterio's (2003) five stage model of storytelling which has been modified and applied in an on-line setting.

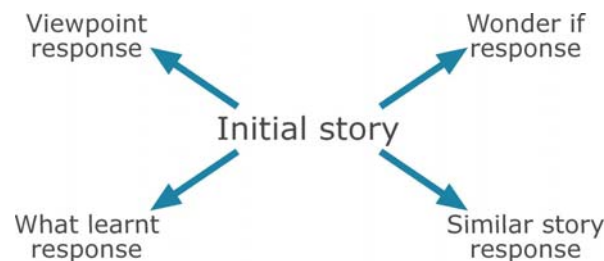


Figure 2
Storytelling model

The on-line model centres around the initial story a student tells (see figure 2). From this, there are four responses that can be made:

- a ‘viewpoint’ response which explores different viewpoints in the story. Considering multiple perspectives enables one to understand other people’s world views and to learn from seeing a different point of view.
- a ‘wonder if’ response which considers different possibilities, it is like reading the story then thinking ‘I wonder if...’, for example, ‘...you could have done X instead of Y’; this enables different outcomes to be explored which can then be considered the next time a similar situation is encountered.
- a ‘similar’ response allows students to tell of a similar experience which creates a bond and empathy with the student. Responding to stories with a similar story is the most common way we respond. Remember the last time you heard someone tell a story, you were very likely to respond by saying, “Oh yes, that happened to me. Now, let me tell you what happened...” or something along those lines.
- a ‘what learnt’ response encourages students to think about what they have learnt from the initial story or from the responses to it. By actively considering what they have learnt, they can apply this knowledge in future situations and may change their approach.

Moon	McDrury & Alterio	StoriesAbout... Assessment
Noticing	Story finding	} Initial story
Making sense	Story telling	
Making meaning	Story expanding	} ‘Viewpoint’ story ‘Wonder if’ story ‘Similar’ story
Working with meaning	Story processing	
Transformative learning	Story reconstructing	‘What learnt’ story

Figure 3
Relationship to Moon and McDrury & Alterio

Each of these responses has been designed to draw out key aspects of McDrury & Alterio’s model without having a moderator or facilitator present and to ensure that stories are processed more deeply (see figure 3). A screen snapshot of the interface can be seen in Figure 4.

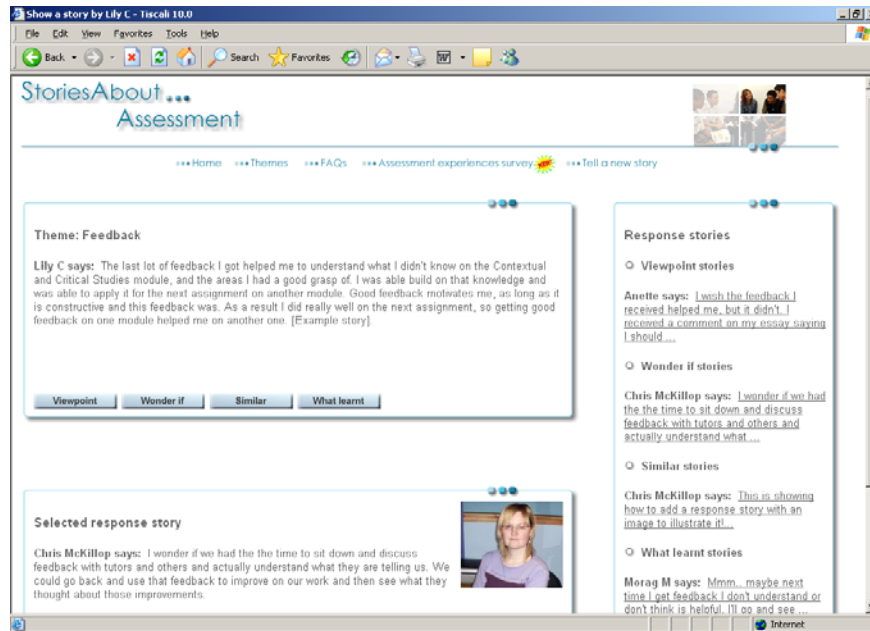


Figure 4
Screen Snapshot

‘StoriesAbout...’ is currently being used by students in art and design who are sharing and discussing their experiences of the assessment process. This application has been designed so that the ‘StoriesAbout...’ can encourage students to reflect on and learn from each others’ experiences and also that their stories can then be analysed to gain a greater understanding of the student experience.

Key findings

Students are raising issues concerning the transparency of the assessment process and the importance of having access to the assessment criteria. Some students have felt frustrated over the lack of clarity about what was being assessed and uncertainty over the mode of the assessment. This had resulted in students completing work which was not required for assessment and some work which should have been assessed not being present during formal assessment. The negative impact that assessment had on students is consistent across stories. The following story is an example of this,

Student A

“Recently we were to hand in a project that we’d been working on for a while, suddenly we were told 3 days before we had to hand it in that we needed to present a power point presentation! There was some confusion about it afterwards, as this ‘new’ demand wasn’t mentioned to us when we were given the project, and no one knew what to do. Come the day and we had to sit through another courses (quite different to ours, but we get joint classes anyway) presentations, that lasted from 9 until lunchtime, we were to attend another class afterwards like we always do, but again we were left in confusion as to what to do with OUR presentations, apparently our tutors didn’t know that we had a class later that day, which we have been attending for the past 6 weeks!! I just feel that there isn’t much communication between them, and they seem to be more interested in that ‘other’ course. Oh, and that powerpoint presentation wasn’t needed after all.”

However, this story is simply recounting what happened and corresponds to the Level 1 definition of reflection discussed earlier which highlights a surface approach.

More positive stories were received where the value of peer support and peer assessment was raised. Students who had experience of teaching were also able to provide a unique insight from their experience as both student and staff.

Students have shown insight into the initial stories and have been able to respond by providing support to help empower the initial storyteller. This has raised the importance of feedback and the need to be confident about one's own creative abilities within the educational setting that drives the assessment process. The following are two examples of students' responses to a story where a student was not feeling confident about their work despite gaining a good grade,

Student B

"If she was given more feedback from her tutors and felt more secure in her peer group she would develop a more confident attitude to her work."

Student C

"I wonder if there had been written/verbal feedback as well as a mark, this situation would have been avoided. A supportive respond to assessment can help to assure and encourage the student to do further work. Peer assessment would also avoid this as the work would be public."

These two examples offer suggestions whereby the outcome of this situation could have been improved, thus corresponding more to a Level 2 definition of reflection.

There has been some reluctance from some students to share their stories, despite recounting them orally to the researcher and being encouraged to put them on the web site. These stories had a strong emotive element to them so it is possible that the telling of the story to the researcher was sufficient to fulfil a cathartic need and no other action was felt necessary by the student. McDrury & Alterio (2003) point out that the cathartic nature of storytelling can inhibit dialogue. Some of these stories were about how assessment experiences in the past (sometimes at school) have left a lasting negative impact on the student.

Asking for on-line contributions, where *your* story can be seen by others, has also been problematic. There are issues regarding confidentiality, what happens if your tutor sees your story and the feeling that *you* will be in the spotlight. As previously discussed, reflection needs to be carried out in a setting where it is clear there can be no negative consequences (Boud & Walker, 1998). Whilst many students have used their names on the site, one has asked for their name to be removed and replaced with their initials. Students are encouraged to use nicknames, usernames, initials etc. if they would like to remain more anonymous. Larger numbers of students will be invited to use the site to encourage a wider dialogue and perhaps provide more stories to encourage the more reluctant student to participate.

A parallel paper-based exercise has investigated students' responses to one example story. This was conducted due to the reluctance from students to contribute stories through the web and this method was chosen to see whether students were having particular difficulties with the storytelling model. Students were able to respond with great insight to the example story using the different response type stories available, thus demonstrating the efficacy of the model. Students were also able to reflect on their experiences and learn from the storytelling process, as demonstrated by the following response,

Student D

"This has reminded me/helped me to see that when I was undergrad, my emphasis was upon the mark received and I didn't seek enough feedback to help me improve both within and beyond my degree. This attitude stemmed from school where getting a high mark, maybe even doing the best in class, seemed to be what mattered. I am learning to realise this is not necessarily a healthy attitude, although it is sometimes hard to fight against."

This type of response demonstrates a deeper reflective ability where the student is seeking to understand past behaviours and improve on them, while recognising the difficulties they are facing in doing so. This corresponds to the deeper Level 3 reflection definition discussed earlier.

As the stories largely concentrated on the negative effect of assessment, further research is being conducted to investigate this by looking at the words that students use to describe their experiences of assessment and learning and by looking at their visual representations of assessment.

Conclusions

So, has storytelling shown it has a grown up role in higher education? Students certainly provided interesting stories about their assessment experiences and were able to respond perceptively and provide advice to their fellow students. However, since it has proved difficult to elicit stories, increasing numbers of students are now being invited to participate. It is hoped that larger numbers will exploit the natural curiosity that students have about other students' experience and will enable students to take ownership of the site and feel that it can empower them and provide them with a collective voice.

Using storytelling in a structured reflective environment, such as 'StoriesAbout...' can enable students with greater knowledge or insight to support and encourage the learning of those with less knowledge or insight. Vygotsky (1978) termed this the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is defined as the distance between the current level of understanding and potential level through guidance with one's peers or tutors. There is certainly evidence that students are providing advice which could help bridge the ZPD.

On-line storytelling can empower communities by giving them a voice (Freidus & Hlubinka, 2002). 'StoriesAbout...' can provide students with a voice, and it can be a tool that provides a focus for those voices, encouraging students to delve deeper beyond the initial reading of the story. It is important that students feel able to take ownership of this site so that this reflective tool can be put to best use. Storytelling can provide an understanding of what it is really like to be a student today in higher education and the impact that assessment is having on our students, as well as providing students with a reflective tool to share and learn from each other's experiences.

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