

STORYLINE – A PEDAGOGY BASED ON RESPECT & FEELINGS

Steve Bell, Chairman of "Storyline International"¹ and one of the original designers of Storyline.

Introduction

To-day we live in a world where access to the facts or content, is getting easier and easier through the use of computers and the internet. Facts are multiplying at an alarming rate. There is no way that any professional can realistically keep up-to-date with everything that is changing. Curriculum designers realise that we must move from a fact-based education system to a skill-based system. The aim now should be that students gain the skills necessary to find information for themselves, that they can communicate their ideas in many different ways, think imaginatively, tackle problems, test solutions and that they learn how to learn.

To be really successful as teachers we know that it is not enough to know our subjects intimately and to be well prepared. Of course these are pre-requisites for success but other aspects have to be taken into consideration. Good teaching is about the quality of the partnership between the teacher and the learner. Their relationship is the key to success! Motivation plays a major role in any successful classroom.

Traditionally, in the past, the teacher was seen as the figure of authority, the person who had power because of superior knowledge. The teacher's function was to pass on this knowledge to the learners, usually through the use of textbooks. The relationship here was one of authority and control - of a body of knowledge to be learned and assimilated. In this view education was about content and not about process.

Teaching should be more than the passing out of books. It should be about designing appropriate and effective learning but what structures can we use as the matrix for such designing?

The teacher as designer

It is my view that Storyline can provide an extremely valuable strategy for this planning but what qualities in Storyline lead to this belief? I want to concentrate on two very special and important aspects - RESPECT and FEELINGS.

¹ Storyline International is an organisation supporting the development of the Storyline approach in a critical and innovative way by sharing on-going research, resources, curriculum development and applications of the pedagogy. The Golden Circle is a non-competitive forum for enquiry into theory and practice to promote professionalism and friendship. Previously known as the European association for Educational Design (EED) the name was changed in August 2009 to include the members from other continents. The Golden Circle Seminars meet after each of the International Conferences held every 3 years and then 18 months after each. The first was held with 12 Storyline leaders in the Netherlands in 1989 and the most recent in Oregon USA hosted 50 members from 14 countries. The 5th International Storyline Conference will be organised by the University of Reykjavik in Iceland in the summer of 2012.

Respect between teacher and learner

A Storyline teacher will start by treating the learners with respect. She recognises that one of the best resources we have in the classroom is the knowledge that already exists within the heads of the students. She will ask key questions and encourage learners to share their existing knowledge. This provides the necessary basis for helping students to construct their own learning process by linking the known to what has to be learned.

Example: While working with community police officers in Strathclyde I met a sergeant whose job it was to train constables to work in classrooms with young children on topics such as 'Stranger Danger'. He confided in me after one of my courses that he had had a bad experience the previous week. He had visited a classroom of six-year-old pupils to demonstrate 'good practice' and thought he had done a good job. As the young constable watched, the sergeant spent five minutes introducing the video. The main theme, which he repeated again and again, was 'Never go with a Stranger'. Then he showed the video 'Never go with a Stranger' and after that he spent a few minutes at the end summing up the big message 'Never go with a Stranger'. He felt confident that he had made a really good presentation until, as he left the classroom one young pupil tugged his sleeve and looking up into his face asked 'What's a stranger?'

The Teacher as Facilitator

The teacher's role is to model good learning procedures by designing good questions, in other words, by example. The students are then encouraged to solve these problems imaginatively, to hypothesise and then to examine their suggested solutions by testing and research. The teacher is a facilitator, someone learning along with the students, a chairman for their discussions.

Example: In one of our popular Storyline topics 'Capital Tours', groups in the class have created families who have won a prize of a free holiday in Europe visiting three capital cities over two weeks. In order to make such a choice we have to find out what is known about European countries and about capital cities. A simple game is introduced. Small blank cards are provided for each family and the group is asked to write on each a country in Europe and the capital city of that country if they know it. A large sheet of coloured paper is then distributed as a background and each group is asked to lay out each of the country cards in the position it holds in relation to its neighbours. In other words each group makes a 'model' of its existing knowledge of Europe. The pupils quickly reach a point where they are desperate to compare their model with a real map and they go to the real maps with excitement and purpose - to confirm if they are correct or to learn something they did not already know.

This form of hypothesising is often a missing link in teaching. Pupils are sent to see 'right answers' before they have had a chance to design the questions they need to ask.

Ownership by the Learner

By sequencing the key questions a red thread is created that forms a logical story. The great paradox in using Storyline is that the teacher has planned for almost every activity in which the learners will engage but the students feel that they have ownership of the story. The teacher has decided on curricular aims and knows what knowledge will be covered and what skills will be practised. This creates feelings of security for both teacher and learner. Each activity follows on naturally from the previous one and

seems necessary for the story to continue. The teacher knows the targets and the general route to be followed while the learner feels confident because of the strength of the context and the relevance of the activities.

Visualisation and Display

The relationship built up between learners and teacher is a very subtle thing. Everything that happens in a classroom can affect mutual respect. When students take some trouble in making visuals, for example, it is important that this is recognised in the way that the teacher helps them to display their work. By being actively involved in making the students' work look better the teacher demonstrates in a simple way respect for that work.

Study Skills

The greatest aim for any teacher should be that students learn how to learn. The measure of success for teachers is how well the students can operate as learners on their own. In Storyline we try to model this study process in everything we do -

- we start from the known
- we design key questions
- we create a hypothesis or model
- we test the model against research evidence
- we adapt our model according to the results
- we review what we have done

The Visit or the Expert Witness

Often the highpoint of a topic study is when the class makes a visit or when an expert visits the class. This brings into the classroom the reality of the outside world but it also treats the learners' studies with respect. In a very obvious way we are relating their classroom work to real life and demonstrating that education is a lifelong process. These visits will always be at the end of the story since it is then that we have the questions ready.

The teacher as designer

Teachers have been doing 'Project Work' for many years and in many ways the results can seem to be very similar to Storyline. However, it is possible for a project to be studied objectively. This is unlike Storyline where there is always a personal involvement through our identification with the characters.

In every Storyline, characters are created, biographies are written and visuals are made. The people are set in a time and place relevant to the story. The learners, the creators, become those people. The characters have feelings about anything that happens to affect their lives in the story.

For example if I were to approach a frieze of a row of shops made by groups in a class and pretend to be a graffiti vandal and threaten one shop I would immediately get an angry response from the creators of that particular visual. I would, of course, never deliberately damage something a child has made but the threat is enough to stimulate a strong reaction. Similarly I can explore the feelings of those whose shops have not been

threatened. Over the years I have been most impressed by how robust yet flexible Storyline is as a structure for affective learning.

Sensitive issues

Storyline has been proved to be extremely useful when dealing with the teaching of very sensitive issues. A teacher is expected to teach and discuss sensitive topics.

Example talking about the real families represented in the classroom can often be very difficult and maybe even embarrassing for the students involved. Using the visuals of an imaginary family created as part of a Storyline is always effective. Children with no father/mother at home can create the family they have or the family they would like to have. The relationships between father and son, mother and daughter etc can be explored, and family rules designed. Friendships can be developed and dislike can be discussed openly and in an unthreatening atmosphere.

Danish experiences

I have been very interested to work with nurse tutors in Denmark. Linda Schumann Scheel and her fellow tutors, based at a Nursing College in Southern Jutland, were concerned that student nurses sent out to practise in hospitals were happy on their return to discuss good practice they had witnessed during their visit but felt embarrassed about discussing bad practice because they felt disloyal to say anything critical about their colleagues. The tutors were interested to see if using a Storyline would overcome this problem.

Together we designed a Storyline where each student created a character as an ideal nurse. The tutors can then ask why the students think their nurses are so good. This produces a list of criteria, which contains their stereotypes of good nursing. The tutor can then expand the story by asking about secret fears that their nurses might have. These can be explored in a sensitive way without embarrassment. The tutor then introduces a new nurse who is not efficient and asks the question "What types of behaviour would identify this nurse as being inefficient?" In their role as ideal nurses the students can 'safely' discuss bad practice which they have recognised or witnessed.

Another Danish colleague, previously an assistant director of education, is now a senior partner with a firm of international management consultants. She frequently uses Storyline as part of her training programme for managers in different businesses. An example of her work would be where managers from the post office service are asked to identify the characteristics necessary to be an effective postal worker. The participants create workers and examine the everyday programme of their characters to highlight the satisfactions and difficulties involved. The identification of serious problems leads to exercises based on imaginative thinking about how to solve these. New ideas are promoted in a positive atmosphere of role-play. This formula has proved to be very stimulating and rewarding for those involved.

Research Evidence

Some years ago the results of a research project set in a successful school in Los Angeles were published. The school was selected because it seemed to have overcome so many difficulties and researchers made an in-depth study for one year led by Professor Walter Murphy of Vanderbilt University and Professor Lynn G Bett of the

University of Alabama. Here are some excerpts from what they wrote about the school and the teachers.

“One of the teaching strategies that has been adopted in virtually all of Jackson’s classrooms is ‘Scottish Storyline’. This approach, in essence, transforms the classroom into a setting for a narrative. Children serve as characters in the story but also work with teachers to create the setting, determine the plot, and plan the conclusion. On one of our visits, we entered a combination first-second grade classroom that had been transformed into a zoo. Acting as animals, zookeepers and guides, each student had spent time in the library, using computers and books to learn about her or his role. After learning about animal ‘habitats’, eating habits, and ‘types’ (i.e. mammal, reptile, amphibian), students calculated amounts and kinds of food needed, planned and ‘built’ the zoo, wrote signs and brochures detailing important information for visitors, and created and conducted a tour of their zoo for parents, teachers and students.

Students explained complex concepts. We observed them engaging in research using computers, books, and other sources of information and watched as they used this information in solving problems. Furthermore, we saw the products they produced – the biographies, brochures, letters, menus, and personal reflections composed by children in the course of the Storylines and were impressed by the creativity, depth of thinking and problem solving abilities reflected in them.

The teachers at the school has strong convictions about the importance of the constructivist approach, one that in their words ‘builds on students’ knowledge and lets them make sense out of what they’re learning’. They also acknowledge that they do not impose their views on others. They however are not hesitant to express their ideas and to work to persuade others to consider them.

The study showed that this teaching strategy was effective because it: ‘builds upon what students already know and upon their interests,’ ‘lets them be active in their own learning,’ ‘turns students into problem solvers,’ and prompts ‘studentsto produce, and forces them to do all sorts of things – math, writing, reading, making speeches, working together – all that ‘good stuff’ that we want them to do. And they love doing it.’

(Extracts from The Journal of School Effectiveness and School Improvement, Nov. 1998)

Storyline International Website www.storyline-scotland.com

For many years Steve Bell was a Staff Tutor in the In-service Department of Jordanhill College of Education in Glasgow which has become the Faculty of Education for Strathclyde University. Now he is the Director of Storyline Scotland and is engaged in educational consultancy.

References

Bell, S., Harkness, S. & White, G. (2008). *Storyline, Past, Present and Future*, Glasgow; University of Strathclyde.

Bell, S. & Harkness, S. (2006). *Storyline – Promoting Language Across the Curriculum*, England; UKLA (United Kingdom Literacy Association).

Bruner, J. (1996). *The Culture of Education*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Creswell, J. (1997). *Creating Worlds, Constructing Meaning: The Scottish Storyline Method*. Portsmouth NH, USA. Heinemann.

Dewey, J. (1974). *Erfaring og opdragelse*; Copenhagen: Christian Ejlers' Forlag.

Falkenberg, C. & Hakonsson, E. (2006). *Storylinebogen; En Håndbog for undervisere* (4th Edit.) Vejle: Kroghs Forlag.

Letschert, J., & Grabbe-Letschert, B., (2006). *Beyond Storyline. Features, principles and pedagogical profundity*. Amsterdam: SLO (Institute for Curriculum Development in the Netherlands)

Moolkum, O., & Moolkum, S. (2000). *Child Centred Storyline Method*. Phuket. Dawn Project. Thailand. (in Thai)

Vygotski, L. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.