

STORYLINE, FEELINGS AND RESPECT

**A paper to support the presentation
by Steve Bell at the**

International Conference on Imagination and Education

held in the

Coast Plaza Hotel, Vancouver,

16 to 19 July 2003

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To be really successful as teachers we know that it is not enough to know our subjects well 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 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.

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 teacher 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.

Teachers who take pride in their professionalism do so by feeling secure in their own philosophy of teaching. 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?

Of course 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.

Why do I think that Storyline is about RESPECT?

Key Questions

As Storyline teachers we start by treating the learners with respect. We recognise that one of the best resources we have in the classroom is the knowledge that already exists within the heads of the students. We 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.

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 visiting 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 then 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 questioning techniques, 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.

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 as 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 targets 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 a visual, 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 is 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 the 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.

In all of these ways Storyline encourages a mutual RESPECT.

But, what about FEELINGS?

Many of us as 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, 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.

Family relationships

As teachers we are expected to teach and discuss about families and family relationships. 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.

Storyline is also being adapted very successfully in other countries for different reasons.

Storyline Thailand

Last year a group of Thai educators from Chulalongkorn University, who have studied with me in Glasgow, created a new association called STANIL (Storyline Thailand Action Network for Integrated Learning). The Chairman of the group, Professor Lawan Wityawudhikul, is excited about the possibilities for using Storyline to meet the new curricular targets encouraged by the Ministry of Education. She and her colleagues are working hard to promote courses that inform about the approach. She emphasises that Storyline is so useful because it is an 'idea' and it doesn't depend on expensive materials. Teachers can use whatever is available to them.

Dr Orathai Moolkum, a co-director of the Dawn Project, a three-year national environmental project in Thailand has introduced the use of selected Storylines to teachers in Thai schools by writing a book with relevant topic outlines.

One of the most popular Storyline topics in Thailand is one called River Families. Groups create families who live in a river village. They introduce their families to each other and then explore the day to day life in the village. Happy and sad incidents can be suggested. How we celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, national holidays can be explored. The river for them is the focus and source of their life; it's their motorway, their shopping centre, their water source, their washhouse etc. The teacher can also aim at a special study by introducing a disaster like river pollution. One morning the family leaves their home to discover dead fish floating on the surface of their river. What has happened? What could cause this? What tests should be made? Who is responsible?

Naturewatch Baltic WWF Project

A group of educators from Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Sweden are working on a project called Naturewatch Baltic. The Naturewatch programme is designed by WWF Sweden and the group are excited that Storyline will be one part of their initiative to help children develop positive attitudes towards their environments and towards each other.

American example

Storyline has been proved to be extremely useful when dealing with the teaching of very sensitive issues.

One of the Storyline Design tutors from Bend in Oregon tells of a teacher who was working very successfully on the Hotel topic when the Principal of the school reminded her that she still had her Drug Education Programme to do that term. The teacher very cleverly wove the need for such a programme into the story by creating an incident. She explained that they needed more staff because the hotel had become so busy and so she, herself, made a character and introduced her as a new chambermaid. All went well in the hotel for the next week and then the new maid disappeared with a large sum of money. A letter arrived from the missing maid

shortly afterwards explaining that she had stolen the money to buy drugs. She pleaded for help. How could they help her overcome her drug problem? This incident gave new meaning to the study of the Drug Education Programme.

Portland, Oregon

Similarly in a school in Portland, Oregon, the teacher used the New Neighbours topic to spark interest in what it would be like to be deaf. The story starts with each group creating a family. The families are neighbours living in the same street and so each group builds a home but then discovers when they display their home on a street frieze that there is an extra house in the middle made by the teacher. This is an empty house waiting for new occupants. It gives many opportunities to discuss what qualities we are looking for in a new neighbour. Eventually the new family arrives and one of the members, a child, is deaf. How can we communicate with him. Many different ideas are explored and then the pupils in the class start to discuss learning the sign language. One of the parents in the school was a teacher with deaf children and she spent a regular period each week visiting the class and teaching them the sign language. Motivation from the story provides a purpose and audience for what is to be taught.

Nurse Tutors

I was very interested to work with nurse tutors in Denmark

Linda Scheel and her fellow tutors, based at the 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 adverse about their colleagues. The tutors were interested to see if using a Storyline would overcome this problem.

Together we designed a topic 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.

Management Consultants

Another Danish friend and 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.

Severely Handicapped Students

Recently I was working with teachers who teach in a special education unit. While there I was shown a Storyline topic designed by one of the teachers to help the children's understanding of relationships. It was a story about two families living in the same neighbourhood. The teenage girl had fallen in love with the boy in the other family but he did not love her. A simple story but a very common one and in this case one that gave the students lots of opportunity to discuss difficulties in relationships.

These are all examples of how feelings are an integral part of using this methodology.

Los Angeles Experiment.

Yet another aspect of feelings is surely the reward that teachers experience when they are involved in this type of work. Five 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.

This class was not unique at Jackson. Indeed, while we were there, we visited a fifth grade class that had become a natural history museum replete with dinosaur bones, leaves, and stones from the local environment, and well-documented examples of tools and homes of early dwellers in this area. We entered a newly developed South American country where third graders were working with an ambassador who sought their help in deciding if he should support bringing industry into the rain forest. And we passed another room of third graders where the students were working as engineers, architects, bankers, citizens and urban planners in order to ‘rebuild’ Kobe, Japan, after the earthquake.

Observations such as these impressed us. We heard students explaining 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.

(Leah) Paul (the School Principal) has strong convictions about the importance of the constructivist approach, one that, in her words, 'builds on students' knowledge and lets them make sense out of what they're learning'. Paul also acknowledges that she does not impose her views on others. She however is not hesitant to express her ideas and to work to persuade others to consider them.

Paul and lead teacher Mary Graves were first exposed to Scottish Storyline during a training institute. Intrigued by the possibilities inherent in the approach and convinced that its premises and approaches were aligned with Jackson's plans and goals, they invited a principal whose school had used Storyline to spend a day with the faculty. As a result of this discussion, 22 teachers participated in Storyline training (organised by Eileen Vopelak, Storyline Design, Santa Barbara). After completing it, they returned and, with some anxiety and great excitement, began to implement Storyline in the classrooms. Other teachers observing the classrooms of teachers trying this new approach began to try similar strategies and asked to be included in the next round of formal training. At the time of the study, every full-time teacher had completed the Storyline program and a number were clamoring for more advanced training.

The widespread adoption of Storyline was impressive to us. More impressive, though, was the knowledge of teachers and administrators about the theories underlying the pedagogy. Teachers consistently explained 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.'

Conclusion

Being a teacher is not easy but it can be creative, enjoyable and rewarding if teachers feel secure in what is expected of them, if they feel that they have a creative part to play as designers of education, if they feel that they are encouraging their students to be independent learners. And if their work involves these aspects of Feelings and Respect. Storyline can play an important part in this.