

Using Short Stories to Enhance Learning Among Pre-service Teachers

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ABSTRACT

A teacher faces multiple challenges in her classroom. A major challenge is the search for a teaching strategy that can be used across different contexts – a strategy that would result not only in learning but also enjoyment of the learning process. The strategy attempted by this writer in teaching Education Studies to pre-service teachers was to integrate short stories into her teaching. Most of the stories interwoven into her lessons were planned, but a few were told spontaneously. The researcher used a job journal to keep track of the stories used, the reasons for choosing those stories, the links made to major topics in the syllabus, the reactions of the learners and her reflections on the use of stories. Data also included oral and written feedback from the participants of the study. The results are promising: Stories, if used thoughtfully, have the power to entertain, enlighten and educate.

INTRODUCTION

It is getting dark. Night is fast approaching. The village children have taken their dinners. With faces mirroring excitement and anticipation, they make their way hurriedly to the village storyteller's house nearby. The storyteller, a primary school teacher, is ready. He sits on the trunk of a fallen coconut tree, next to a lit mosquito coil. When several children have gathered, sitting on homemade stools, he starts his stories. Before long, the young listeners are spellbound as his words transport them to unknown, exciting worlds – worlds full of colour, actions and emotions. Indeed, his words touched the hearts of these children. Later, when he finishes, they leave contentedly though reluctantly. There is still tomorrow to look forward to when once again, the village storyteller takes his seat on the old, coconut trunk.

That village storyteller was my father. As a child, I loved listening to his stories. As an adult, I followed his footsteps and became a teacher. I also use stories regularly, particularly in classroom teaching. I have used this teaching strategy with learners in two major contexts: In my day-to-day classroom interactions with pre-service teachers, and in facilitating professional development workshops and courses for certified teachers and college lecturers.

The first group of learners, namely pre-service teachers, are the participants in this case study. More specifically, I studied the impact of my use of short stories on a class of thirty-four pre-service teachers in the one-year teacher education programme for university graduates known as *Kursus Perguruan Lepas Ijazah* (KPLI). I taught *Education Studies* in

this class during the first semester of 2003, and am currently teaching the same group in the second semester. In teaching specific topics in the Educational Psychology component like *Motivation, Thinking and Learning Styles*, and *Interpersonal Communication*, I intentionally integrated short stories into my lessons. I did the same with topics in the Pedagogy component such as *Classroom Management*, and *Interaction and Communication in the Classroom*. In interweaving short stories into these topics in the syllabus, I had one or more of the following purposes in mind:

- setting the mood
- introducing a new topic
- illustrating an idea or concept
- reinforcing a teaching point
- preventing monotony
- motivating learners
- providing a context for discussion
- challenging learners' thinking
- stimulating learners' imagination
- educating in a subtle way
- wrapping up a lesson

Underlying this case study are the following research questions: (a) How did the participants respond to the use of short stories during *Education Studies* lessons? (b) What is the nature of their learning emerging from the use of short stories in class? I sought information as to whether they enjoyed the short stories told, how the stories affected them, and whether learning was enhanced through integrating short stories in my lessons with them. In my view, learning has to be both fun and meaningful. I hoped that the stories not only entertained them, they would enlighten the pre-service teachers on certain themes, topics, and theories in the syllabus and, most importantly, educate them in the process. Thus, my goals in integrating stories within my lessons were to entertain, enlighten and educate simultaneously. This study was necessary to check the extent to which my goals were realised and to elicit suggestions for further improvement of the strategy of integrating short stories into classroom teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review looks into the popularity of storytelling, the educational importance of storytelling, the power of stories compared with other means of persuasion, and storytelling skills. The literature pertaining to these different aspects of storytelling has helped me to determine the boundaries of this case study.

How popular is storytelling? In certain parts of the United States, storytelling is a very big event. In Jonesborough, Tennessee, for example, thousands of people gather each October to celebrate the National Storytelling Festival (Smithsonian Magazine, March 1997). Storytelling is popular in this and other countries for a variety of reasons. According to Miller (1996), an educator with much knowledge of storytelling within and outside the United States, human bonding occurs in the course of a storytelling event. Furthermore, Miller believes that there is a strong possibility that storytelling will spill over into real life. It is in this light that many of the stories used in this study were selected.

Much has been written about the educational importance of stories. According to Kouzes and Posner (1993), “how we educate and how our messages are communicated are major distinguishing factors in whether what we have to say will be remembered, endorsed and followed” (p.197). In such a context, they advocate that “*stories are powerful educational . . . tools* (italics added)” (p.197).

The view about stories being powerful educational tools is supported by others (Ellis, 2001), especially where real-life personal stories are concerned (Neumann & Peterson, 1997). Neumann and Peterson compiled powerful, personal stories of well-known female educators in their book. The stories cover multiple types of struggles, each highly educative particularly for women in the education profession. Their stories of eventual triumph have influenced the direction and completion this study.

Stories and storytelling should not be looked at in isolation, but should be seen in comparison with other educational strategies. Along this line, researchers have carried out comparative studies of the effectiveness of stories. In one particular study, the researchers compared storytelling with other methods of communication such as using statistics only, using statistics with a story, and providing a straightforward statement. The result was that the most effective method was using a story only (Martin & Powers, in Kouzes & Posner, 1993). Such findings have been instrumental in convincing me that storytelling as a teaching strategy has great potential.

To allow stories to have their full effect on listeners, the act of storytelling calls for many related skills. Tips for storytelling have been offered by many (Fisher & Terry, 1990; Miller, 1996; Collins & Cooper, 1997). In addition, there have been numerous reports about famous storytellers from whom we can learn much about the art of storytelling (Saul, 2002; Wilson, 2001).

INSTRUMENTATION AND DATA COLLECTION

I collected data through different channels. First, every lesson with the participants was planned in writing. In lesson planning, I decided on the stories that I would use, when I would use them, the purposes for using them, and the underlying messages that the pre-service teachers should grasp. Thus, my lesson plans were a good source of data for my study.

Each lesson plan ends with a reflection section. Here, if stories had been used, I recorded my perceptions of how well they were told as well as how well they were received. Thus, observational data, oral feedback from participants of the study and my own reflections contributed to this investigation. My reflections were done as soon as it was possible to do so, usually immediately after a lesson. In addition to such documentation, I kept a job journal focusing on the storytelling strategy. The difference between the lesson plans and the job journal is that the former had brief reflections whereas the latter had reflections of greater depth.

I obtained written feedback from the participants in the form of an open-ended questionnaire. Participants were reminded not to write their names in the questionnaires. This was to ensure authenticity and accuracy of data. Without exception, every participant responded and this proved to be the richest source of data for the study. After the questionnaires were collected, running numbers were assigned randomly from P 1 to P 34 (meaning Participant 1 to Participant 34) to assist data analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

My data analysis drew on interpretive methods within the qualitative research tradition. The process involved on-going analyses based on my observations, oral feedback from the participants and my written reflections, as well as a more formal and focused analysis after data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire.

On-going analyses proceeded in the following manner. First, I crafted immediate reflections in narrative form after my lessons. These reflections comprised my thoughts about the success (or otherwise) of my strategy of using stories in classroom teaching. The on-going analyses helped me in two ways: In directing my investigation as well as in deciding the nature of the questionnaire to be administered later.

After administering the questionnaire, data analysis was more formal and focused. Close analysis resulted in three compelling themes which I have categorised under the sub-headings of “Rainbow of Feelings,” “Bridges,” and “Spillover into Real Life.” These themes are illustrated and supported through verbatim comments from the participants. Comments from a great number of the participants are shared in this study.

Findings

The results were heartening and affirmative of the strategy of using stories in teaching. In fact, some of the participants’ feedback went beyond my expectations. I share the major findings of the study below under three metaphorical sub-headings namely *Rainbow of Feelings*, *Bridges* and *Spillover into Real Life*.

Rainbow of Feelings

During the duration of the study, I had interwoven many stories into my lessons, using the oral tradition of storytelling. Some of the stories were told without endings, leaving the participants to guess what finally happened. Two stories told in this style were *Lagoon Worms* and *The Burning of Winter Houses*. Some were told in the participatory storytelling fashion. These included *The Cookie Thief* (Cox, in Canfield & Hansen, 1996) which was a favourite among them, and *Follow Your Dreams* which was also well liked. Others depended entirely on my words and actions, the participants being purely the audience. Among these were *A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy* (Hilbert, in Canfield & Hansen, 1996), *All the Good Things* (Sister Helen, year unknown), *True Height* (Naster, in Canfield, Hansen & Kirberger, 1997), *The Story of Margaret and Ruth (or Ebony and Ivory)* (Patrick, in Canfield, Hansen, McCarty & McCarty, 1997), *The Story of Charles Dickens, Mrs Thompson’s ESL Classroom*, *The Iron is On!* and *The Three Abduls*.

Every single participant voiced enjoyment of the stories, some in very elaborate terms. Their enjoyment of the stories made me pleasantly aware of the magic of stories and storytelling: They have the strange power of drawing out a range of human emotions from listeners via vicarious experiences. The data tells us that the stories entertained the participants:

Yes, I enjoyed listening to the stories. Actually, I loved to listen to the stories. (P 2)

We are all adults but sometimes we do need the stories, remind us of those good old days. Please don’t stop telling stories in the class. It would kill me, just studying without entertainment. (P 18)

I was kept on my seat when she (the researcher) told the stories. It was interesting, fun. (P 29)

Carry on with more stories. I, perhaps all of us, love it very much. (P 34)

The stories refreshed, energised and cheered them up:

The stories were like extra food supplementary vitamins to get more energy. . . . the stories cheered up our moods and we were refreshed. . .(P 10)

I'm really enjoying the . . . stories. First, I feel not bored, feel fresh and make myself interested to listen to the stories. (P 17)

They drew lots of laughter:

. . . it's so funny but at the same time, the story tried to make ourselves to think and try to change our bad attitudes. (P 17)

. . . the stories are funny but they have hidden messages for us. (P 22)

I like "The Cookie Thief." I was happy to see Adam's (pseudonym) face during the role play (drama). He acted good as if he's the cookie thief. . . . Haha! "The Iron is On!" is a very funny story. I couldn't stop laughing because my mother is exactly like her! (P 27)

And they drew feelings of sadness, sometimes manifested in tears:

The stories that really melted my heart were "True Height" and "A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy." (P 8)

(The) story that really touched my heart and made me cry was "A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy." (P 11)

For me the feelings vary for each story. There are stories which can make us laugh and there are stories which can make us cry. (P 11)

I puzzled about whether it was the content of the stories or the storytelling that contributed more significantly to the results above. The data indicated that the content of the stories and the act of storytelling went in tandem. I had to be selective about the stories and their underlying messages but having developed some storytelling skills also helped in strengthening the storytelling strategy in classroom instruction. This conclusion was reached through the participants' written feedback. These were some of their verbatim comments:

I really like the way she (the researcher) told us the stories. Very entertaining. (P 1)

The researcher had conducted the storytelling session with such passion and enthusiasm. She is capable of creating the mood she needed regarding the topics she was about to teach for the day. (P 11)

The lecturer knows the stories very well. (P 12)

Your choice of words is simple, easy to understand. Your tone and the way you deliver the story is very interesting. Have you noticed the "aahhh" thing every time you finish telling the stories? To make that word come out from listeners is not an easy task. . . (P 15)

. . . the stories are wonderful stories that I will remember and one day I hope I could tell my future generation. (P 32)

Bridges

Making academic learning simultaneously meaningful and enjoyable was my main motivation in integrating stories into my classroom teaching. The feedback affirmed that the thirty-four participants, without any exception, enjoyed the integration of stories within *Education Studies* lessons. But did the stories help them to learn the subject better? In other words, were they able to build bridges from the stories to the concepts or topics in the *Education Studies* syllabus? Each story that I used was, in my view and in my planning, closely related to the topic I was teaching. It was important to check if my efforts resulted in positive outcomes in terms of academic learning.

The results showed that the stories helped the participants make connections to the topics in the syllabus -- the stories did not merely entertain the learners. Academic learning and fun went hand-in-hand and convinced me that I should continue to integrate stories within my classroom instruction. The comments below indicate that the stories told in class enlightened them about topics taught in *Education Studies*:

The stories can make me understand the topic better and made me interested to enter the education class. (P 2)

. . . the researcher should continue using stories in her lesson with my class. When she tells us a story, we can remember better the topic she is lecturing. . . . (P 3)

The stories were really interesting. It was actually adding flavour to the lesson taught. Some stories had very close connections to the lesson taught so much so they help me to recall some of the lessons at the end of the day. (P 8)

. . . the stories helped me to reduce my tension and helped me to understand the topic better. I can relate the stories with the topics that were being taught. . . . (P 12)

When the lecturer tells some stories it may help the students to understand more and at the same time it will not stress the students with very complicated theories. The important (thing) is how I can apply the theories into life sometimes. (P 14)

She (the researcher) is able to apply the stories immediately in the class according to the particular topic we are studying. Besides this, all these stories are good to listen to. (P 20)

And all the stories are related to the syllabus . . . it can actually help me in my exam by applying the stories to the theories. (P 32)

Spillover into Real Life

Academic learning featured as the major focus in the preceding section. I had a responsibility to prepare my class in *Education Studies*, an examinable subject. However, if that was all I aimed for, and if I reached the learners at that level only, I might have succeeded as a classroom instructor but failed as a true *educator*. Classroom teaching in any

subject should touch real life; learners should be able to make connections with serious issues in life. Education is much more than being informed or widening our knowledge; education involves feelings and values, and wanting to make life better for ourselves and for others. Indeed, education is about acquiring noble values that, when practised, contribute to self-respect and the respect of others. Education is much more than “being learned”. Through my case study, I discovered the potential and power of stories and storytelling in “educating” listeners. There was no need for moralising or preaching; the underlying messages of the stories were powerful enough to move the listeners. As an example, let us look at what the participants had to say about *A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy*, a story about how a teacher, overcome by a personal loss, was ironically “educated” by a six-year-old child who later died of leukaemia. This story was told in the context of *Interpersonal Communication*, a sub-topic in the Educational Psychology component:

I learnt about friendship, helpfulness, truth. (P 2)

. . . from the story “A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy,” I learnt that we should appreciate a person when he or she needs our help. We should be willing to help a person when they really need us. We also appreciate a young child. . . . They (children) can be such a wonderful group of people. (P 3)

We have to thank God for every good or bad thing given to us. We have to accept all the “bad things” and try to use these bad things to have “good things” later. (P 4)

I learnt that I should be a good listener. (P 5)

Never give up in life. If we have difficulties in life, there are other people who have more difficult times in their lives. (P 21)

I have learnt many things in. . . “A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy” because sometimes when we were in a bad/sad mood, we did not think about others and it was very selfish. I don’t really notice what I have done or who I have hurt before but after I listened to this story, I will try not to do the same thing again. (P 32)

Another example worth looking at is *True Height*, the story of Michael Stone who, in spite of being blind, became a champion in the pole vault event. This story was told in connection with the topic *Motivation* in the Educational Psychology component:

The sad stories really . . . motivate me to accept the reality of life and motivate me to face challenges boldly. Nothing is impossible. (P 8)

Be glad, thankful and appreciate whatever we have now. Don’t always look down on ourselves or others. Physical disabilities is not a barrier to achieve our dreams or ambitions. Don’t think that we are the only person who is facing problems because there are people who are facing worst problems than us. (P 9)

On a more general level, without naming any particular story, the participants wrote comments which indicated a wonderful spillover of the stories into their own lives:

Keep up the good and effective work. Please tell more stories so that it can be applicable for us in our lives. (P 3)

(Each) of the stories has a moral value in it. Some of them were very touching. I have learnt something from all the stories. . . . (P 9)

Thanks to you, I already started to read . . . stories which I found very interesting to pass time and for my soul. It makes me realise that my obstacles in life are very easy compared to people in those books. I learned to handle my life/problems with ease now. . .(P15)

I felt most of the stories were related to my daily life. They can be useful in order to improve myself. (P 25)

I also feel amazed with the characters and the story lines. Some of it encourages me to improve my attitude, thinking, behaviour and so on. (P 26)

. . . the stories actually encouraged me to think deeply what I have done before that might hurt others. (P 32)

. . . I felt very interested. Some of the stories inspired me to do better in my life. (P 33)

It makes me feel that teaching is not only about (the) syllabus and lesson plans but it can also cover the real story of our life. (P 34)

SIGNIFICANCE

I started the study with two research questions. First, how did the participants respond to the use of short stories during *Education Studies* lessons? Second, what is the nature of their learning emerging from the use of short stories in class? The results which I have shared indicated that the content of stories combined with the oral tradition of storytelling entertained the participants, enlightened them on various topics in the *Education Studies* syllabus, and also educated them with lessons about real life. Thus, this study is significant in that it highlights the potential and power of short stories to entertain, enlighten, and educate simultaneously.

In both pedagogy or andragogy, there is often a tendency for practitioners to seek new strategies in order to make learning more effective. This is a positive action that should be lauded. However, we also need to be aware that sometimes, new strategies may become “fashionable” for just a short while and are then pushed to the side when newer, more innovative ideas come to the forefront. In my view, the storytelling strategy is unlikely to suffer such a fate. Storytelling has been with us for generations. There is no age bias since both children and adults, indeed even the aged, are equally drawn to good stories and storytelling. Neither is there a gender bias: Men and women, boys and girls are fascinated with stories. There does not seem to be an ethnicity or nationality bias: People of all ethnicities and nationalities enjoy stories. Indeed, stories are fadproof and universally appealing. If this is so, a teaching strategy premised on storytelling is likely to thrive regardless of the times. Of course this does not mean that we ignore changes in instructional methodology. The primary message underlying this study is that storytelling can be an important and *relatively permanent* part of our classroom practice.

Additionally, I am glad to share one last discovery resulting from the study. Several of the participants did not treat the storytelling as a matter concerning the storyteller only. Instead, they bridged their observations of my strategy with their own future careers as teachers:

It (storytelling) is one way to attract the class which we can use for our future teaching career. (P 7)

I like to listen to stories and all these stories will also be applicable to us because we may use it when we teach at school. Children love to listen to stories. (P 20)

As a teacher to be, we can share the stories with our future pupils; it helps to reduce/ease tension. (P 25)

Add more stories. If possible, please give the text of the stories. . . It will be good for us because we can apply it when we are teaching in the future. (P 33)

I conclude with the hope that my reader is, in some way, similarly moved by this account of my classroom practice.

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