

## **The Teacher as Storyteller**

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Stories are all around us in our daily lives and the daily lives of the children and young people that we teach. From very early in life, we encounter parables, allegories, fables, folktales, legends, epics, adventure stories, love stories, biographies, and many others. We listen to them, read them, view them in plays and films, hear them in song, make them up, tell them, and change them. They help us to laugh, cry, imagine, reflect, and lose ourselves.

Even the most culturally deprived child who watches television sees thousands of very short stories. Shorter even than television shows are advertisements. There is the sad tale of the man who went shopping overseas without his credit card, the story of the young man who suddenly became popular when he began to use the right aftershave, and the narrative of the family whose mealtimes were transformed through the purchase of a set of knives!

In his book *The End of Education*, Neil Postman (1996) suggests that such advertisement stories often take the form of religious parables, presenting a concept of sin (missing the

mark), signs to the way of redemption, and a vision of heaven (blissful fulfillment). He says they have a shaping role in our lives, teaching us to bow down to the god of consumerism.

It is easy to think of stories simply as either incidental narratives or deliberate efforts to entertain us. Yet stories are much more than leisure activities. The story form is essential to the way we understand ourselves and other people. Anything we know about actions, events, our lives, and other people's importance to us exists as part of some story. Our dreams, however vague or chaotic, are in the form of stories. Whether awake or asleep, we place happenings, things, and characters into patterns in space and time. We locate ourselves, one another, and everything that happens to us in story contexts, most of which we make up ourselves. As the T-shirt slogan reads, "I am starring in my own soap opera."

Our consciousness of stories affects what we become, so the greater our experience of stories, the better we are likely to be at making sense of life. We come to place the little stories of our lives in the big stories. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) writes, "It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world ... that children learn or mislearn both what a child is and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are." MacIntyre goes on to describe those deprived of stories as "unscripted," lacking a sense of how life should go. It is perhaps more common for individuals to end up "mis-scripted," fed with unhealthful narratives.

Neil Postman's likening of television advertisement stories to religious parables points to how big stories, or metanarratives, can be embedded in the little stories that we hear and tell. And this is of importance to us as teachers, whatever subject we teach.

In his book *Teaching as Story Telling*, Kieran Egan (1989) proposes that we see the curriculum as a story told by teachers, a story composed of all the little stories associated with the various areas of learning and their many topics. This view is an alternative to seeing curriculum in the traditional assembly-line way in terms of aims, objectives, content, methods, and evaluation. He argues that a storytelling approach is more true to how we learn and come to understand. It engages the student more effectively by involving the imaginative and affective rather than solely the cognitive.

In teaching a unit on the topic of communities to six-year-old children, Egan suggests that a village/town/city can be portrayed in two different ways. One tells a story of desperate and inventive survival, the other one of largely unseen and creeping destruction.

In the first, the children are led to think of the community as waking up one morning to find itself surrounded by a high, thick, steel wall that has the effect of totally cutting it off from the world outside, including its water, electricity, and telephone lines. Food and water can no longer be assumed to be available. The community comes to be seen as "a machine which people have made to help our survival and fend off destruction," and the local supermarket "not as a routine prosaic aspect of community life, but as one of the wonders of the world ... a miracle of human ingenuity and organizational skill."

Egan then writes a different story, one of the community as an organism, not a pleasant creature but a malevolent one that is out to consume and destroy for survival. At the beginning of the story, it is a small creature settled down by the river, but “[a]s the years went by, it grew by drinking the pure water and dirtying it as it passed through and by eating away at the surrounding land. It became bigger and fatter.... It sent tentacles (roads) deep into the countryside to get food from more and more distant places to satisfy its ever-growing appetite, destroying the natural woods and meadows. Some tentacles ripped up the land to get minerals and fuels which it ate in its factories, dirtying further the land, air and water.”

Through curriculum, big stories of human life and purpose can be embedded in the little stories that we tell even six-year-old children.

For teachers, the idea that children’s minds (and ours) are “story-shaped” is essential for understanding the responsibility entailed in our work. We should be particularly careful when telling *the* story of something.

Consider the ways in which the story of Christopher Columbus can be told. In the 1890s, around the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ landing in America, it was commonly said that Europe’s intelligentsia in his time believed the world was flat. We now know that they did not; educated people believed the earth was spherical but disagreed about its size. The reason why the fictitious version won acceptance was that Columbus’ journey was believed in the 1890s to be a triumph of progress. He had “discovered” America, greatly advancing the onward march of civilization.

A hundred years later, the Native American perspective had gained influence. For them and their sympathizers, Columbus had blundered into a continent that did not need to be discovered, instigating half a millennium of land theft, ethnic cleansing, outrageous waste of natural resources, and the destruction of a natural paradise.

So in a hundred years, Columbus had changed from a hero to a villain because people had stopped believing that the human story was one of progress, believing instead that the story was one of rapacious exploitation. In which story, then, should we place the voyage of Columbus in schools?

Belief in human progress, particularly as a structure for teaching, is viable. But we now know it is only one way of structuring the facts. Consider the story of space flight. It can be presented as a miracle of human cleverness—a sequence of increasingly sophisticated jet- and rocket-propelled engines, leading to escape from the earth's atmosphere. Alternatively, that story can be focused differently by telling students of a great leap forward in motor propulsion achieved under the stimulus of war by the German invention of the V-2 bomb, which was developed using slave labor in concentration camp conditions. Thus, space flight developed from either a competitive killing industry or humanity's innocent curiosity.

The story of mathematical probability can also be told in different ways. We may tell of a game of cards that had to be abruptly terminated and the mathematicians who came to the rescue by calculating how to divide the stake money. Alternatively, we may tell the story of John Graunt's using the Bills of Mortality to calculate life expectancy of people of different ages in seventeenth-century London, thus providing a reasonable basis for life insurance.

These two stories are themselves set in two different big stories. One focuses on the

unpredictable distribution of chances by the goddess of fortune, the other on the regularities of the human condition and the facts of life and death.

Some of these big stories, seldom spelled out to children, are very big indeed. There is, for example, the “march of progress” story, the “growth of democracy” story, the “lucky chance” story, or the “global marketplace” story. They carry enormous burdens of interpretation in our teaching. Christians profess to live in a different story. The Bible contains many different stories, but they occur in a story that begins with God’s creation of the world, goes through humanity’s deliberate fall from God’s high purpose, and focuses on Jesus’ death and resurrection, which redeems humans from their bondage to sin and its consequences. Finally, there is the triumphant end of the story in the second coming of Christ. All our living in and learning about the world can be placed in that sequence: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation.

Children need such overarching stories, for without them their lives have no meaning and direction. They also need to understand that there is more than one story by which people place their knowledge in time and space. Teachers are, of all people, responsible for the storytelling in our society. We are called to live in God’s big true story and to ensure that this story is told in the curriculum.