The Storytelling Teacher: Using Storytelling to Improve Engagement and Content Retention in History and Social Studies for All Learners

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Abstract:
The purpose of this study is to explore the way that story is used as a method of making the culture and history of distant and diverse peoples meaningful to junior high school students. Canada's aboriginal community utilized the traditional method of communicating the history and teachings of their people via oral communication. These stories teach the student about the way that a culture has lived, utilized the land and interacted with nearby cultures. Often learners are reluctant to engage in traditional history classes due to a lack of engagement, but when teaching uses the aboriginal model of oral history, students have a greater ability to retain and recall the essential understandings of a topic area. In addition, through learning the stories held in high esteem by diverse cultures, students gain a greater appreciation of their values and perspectives. As a result, this study demonstrates that by learning multiple perspectives through the stories valued by different communities, students are more likely to learn necessary curricular outcomes. In addition, students are also more likely to form positive opinions of distant cultures and to feel greater responsibility to contribute to global society.

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Introduction

In the southeast corner of Alberta, home to some of the least fertile soil and the sparsest populations in the province, the Milk River carves its way through the Great Plains. Cutting cliffs and hoodoos into the landscape, the river for centuries formed a path by which many of the aboriginal people of North America travelled. Along its banks, 42 kilometres southeast of the Town of Milk River in the Canadian Badlands, is the archaeological site at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park. In this site, upon the ancient rock can be found one of the "largest concentrations of prehistoric and historic period Native American pictographs and petroglyphs in North America." (Writing-on-Stone, glyphs. Retrieved 2015). Chiseled into the sandstone, drawn using ironstone or coal or painted with ochre, are the stories used to teach generations of the Blackfoot and Shoshone youth the stories of their people. (Derworiz, 2014).

Storytelling has existed since prehistoric times as a means of communicating not only the histories, but the values and ideals of the societies that developed them. Culture is built upon the stories of its people. Story is the route through which the worldviews of societies are developed and passed down from one generation to the next. Even today, the value of a great storyteller can be seen in the way that people seek out movies, books and articles or even an engaging conversationalist at a social function. The power of the story is evident. There is evidence to support the assertion that students in all grade levels benefit from learning concepts related to history and social studies through storytelling, The power of storytelling is critical among the population of students we commonly identify as "struggling students". In the context of this paper, storytelling includes traditional cultural stories, those told by parents and teachers about real life experiences and stories detailing events from history. This study aims to detail why storytelling is an effective pedagogical tool, particularly for reluctant learners, how it can best be used in a social studies classroom to teach history, and the ways in which storytelling in history can be transferred to other areas of study. Due to the way that story helps students retain factual information by relating it to emotion, storytelling has proven to have the power to effectively improve the academic engagement and content retention of all learners. (McCullum, Maldonado & Bates 2014).

Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool for Reluctant Learners

Over time, education in many Western settings became linear and explicit, focusing on the presentation of ideas and key concepts in point form, with the educator's idea of key concepts highlighted throughout. Students' ability to comprehend their reading was assessed by the way they could look at, and restate a text and the key strategy to helping students retain information was through taking notes while the teacher instructed the class. (Kariuki & Kent 2014). Testing based on assessing a student's intelligence quotient, or I.Q., gained prominence in academic circles and was led by Lewis Terman, a psychologist from Stanford University. Terman believed that I.Q. tests "could be used to determine the quality of people by ethnicity, by race, by class… and so the very belief in the capacity of people to learn was undermined." (Mondale, 2001. p. 101). Questions on the test were "designed to mention mental aptitude rather than academic achievement, and could be highly subjective." (Mondale, 2001 p. 102). In an academic world dominated by the belief in mental

aptitude testing without the presence of story, millions of students were thus left behind.

Teaching through story has long been a generally acknowledged pedagogical tool for teaching young children how to read. According to Malo and Bullard (2000), the number of hours that preschool students are read to, receiving the stories of their own culture, is a direct indicator as to how well they will be able to read when they are older. Additionally, "reading aloud to children not only increases reading achievement scores, but also listening and speaking abilities including the ability to use more complex sentences, literal and inferential comprehension skills, concept development, letter and symbol recognition, and positive attitudes about reading." (Malo & Bullard, 2000). Additionally, "Those who regularly hear stories, subconsciously acquire familiarity with narrative patterns and begin to predict upcoming events" (Teaching Storytelling, 2000) and can use their ability to recognize patterns in stories to better understand new and unfamiliar text. Students who are taught an idea from a "skilled storyteller" (McCullum et al., 2014) have more effective and detailed recall and use a more diverse vocabulary (Malo & Bullard, 2000). Oral comprehension skills gained from a tradition of listening to stories have indicated enhanced reading comprehension skills as well as improved oral and written expression. (Berninger & Abbott, 2010).

Storytelling has been proven to be a particularly effective teaching tool when used with a student audience that comes from diverse backgrounds that have traditions of storytelling. This has proven to be true for students of aboriginal (Atleo, 2009), German, African American, Hispanic and Irish (Malo & Bullard, 2000) cultural traditions. Haven explains that "every culture in the history of this planet has created stories: myths, fables, folk tales… all developed and used stories." (Haven, 2007. p. 4). In some areas, traditional testing and teaching have shown a great deal of cultural bias against students from diverse backgrounds, particularly those who speak English as a second language. Based on I.Q. testing, which was delivered in English, "two-thirds of Mexican Americans in the 1930s were classified as slow learners, and eventually mentally retarded, on the basis of I.Q. tests given as early as kindergarten." (Mondale, 2001. p. 104).

Often students who are reluctant learners are empowered by the opportunity to learn through story. Storytelling, through a skilled storyteller who uses voice and gesture effectively, has the ability to engage students with academic difficulties both in the processes of receiving information and developing their vocabulary, or by processing it and having the opportunity to engage in the storytelling process themselves. In a position statement from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the organization explains that students at every level of schooling who are not as competent as their peers in reading and writing are often exceptional storytellers. (Teaching Storytelling, 2000). Additionally, the NCTE explains that soon after people develop the ability to speak, they develop the ability to tell stories. Stories are told in an informal manner as people relate the activities of their everyday lives, and the best storytellers can effectively use gestures, hyperbole and changes in the intonation of their voices to increase the effect of the story that they are telling. Listeners can learn through the intricacies of speech that they have been interpreting since youth, and can often derive meaning from a story that they could not from factual referencing. (Teaching Storytelling, 2000).

Stories can assist reluctant learners in acquiring necessary information because it taps into social and emotional aspects of the ways in which people think, helping relate a fact to a feeling, such as loneliness, injustice or triumph. In *How the Brain Learns,* Sousa (2006) explains that "students are much more likely to remember curriculum content in which they have made an emotional investment… teachers often need to use strategies that get students emotionally involved with the learning content.(need a page number with a direct quote)" In a study using *Inanimate Alice,* a digital novel that uses storytelling through text, games, images and music, struggling readers were able to improve their literacy skills by engaging with the story they were learning (Fleming, 2013. p. 326). By accessing the basic emotions of human life, storytelling assist students in relating the feelings incurred by the people living the story to feelings remembered in the stories of their own lives. It is through stories that students best learn information about the world around them, which assists students as they engage in the process of ordering their "physical, emotional, and social environment." (Malo & Bullard, 2000). Additionally, students can achieve increased retention of coursework by linking the material learned in the story to similar stories that they have lived in their own lives. This is effective in meeting the needs of emerging readers and those struggling with the acquisition of new content.

Gottshall (2014) explains that fMRIs illustrate the ways that the human brain operates while engaged in a story. While participating in the watching, reading or listening of a story, fMRIs show that while a person is thus engaged, they experience the same range of emotions as the characters they identify with in the story. Their brains are experiencing anger, fear, lust or exhilaration alongside the characters that they are identifying with in the story. The predictable outcome is that when tied with human emotion, the brain becomes more invested, or engaged in the material than it otherwise would have been. "At a neurological level, whatever is happening on the page or on the stage isn't just happening to them, it is happening to us as well." (Gottschall, 2014).

Storytelling does more than just assist students with content retention and make them more engaged in their learning. It is a model of how to tell stories of their own. By listening to a good storyteller, students learn the basics of introducing an idea, capturing a listener's attention and leaving a message that resonates, regardless of the purpose with which the story is told. Students learn to maintain eye contact with their audience, use gestures and body language and change the pacing and tone of their voice. Modelling of storytelling is useful for developing students into better writers, better public speakers and better storytellers, which is a worthwhile achievement in itself.

At no point is it argued that storytelling should be used in isolation from other teaching strategies. Storytelling is an effective way to encourage students to participate in subject material and to retain information. Storytelling is a valuable pedagogical tool for any teacher's toolbox, and it is best used in cooperation with other techniques, such as content area reading, small group work and class discussion.

Storytelling to Teach History

Historians are storytellers (Gottschall, 2012). One of the best methods for the passing of factual information is through story, and this is especially the case in regards to the teaching and learning of history. When a traditional storyteller entrances an audience with the history of their group, children gain a sense of history in an immediate and powerful way. Teaching history through an examination of the stories brought about by its events, teachers have an opportunity to use their voice, gestures and mannerisms to teach particular concepts. In doing so, "historical figures and events linger in children's minds when communicated by way of a narrative. The ways of other cultures, both ancient and living, acquire honor in story." (Teaching Storytelling, 2000). Storytelling is the oldest teaching methodology for conferring a people's history to future generations.

The most important aspect of being able to effectively use a storyteller method in order to teach history, is to examine the necessary curriculum and find the stories that can best address the concept that needs to be taught. For instance, in the social studies program for the province of Alberta, students are required to understand "how did the Renaissance spark the growth and exchange of ideas and knowledge across Europe (i.e., astronomy, mathematics, science, politics, religion, arts)?" (Alberta Grade 8 Social Studies, 2005). The stories that can help answer this question are beautiful and inspiring, and can lead to exceptional student engagement and understanding as well. The storyteller needs to have the ability to effectively use voice and gesture in order to evoke the necessary memories and emotions of their students. When this is done, storytelling, either through an effective teacher or a guest speaker who can effectively connect story to the essential understandings being taught, "brings learning to life, helping students grasp the intricacies and nuances of today's challenging decision-making environment." (Fawcett & Fawcett, 2011). When used in cooperation with discussion and small group activity, the storyteller approach teaching history can have effective and predictable outcomes using a variety of different assessment techniques.

Transferring storytelling methodology from history to other subject areas

The storytelling methodology is effective in teaching far more than simply the history of one's people. It is a teaching tradition that can be witnessed in the music classroom (Malo & Bullard, 2000) when the natural rhythms and patterns in a story can be replicated by an orchestra. It can be seen in ethics or civics classes when one relates the story "grandmother tells of her adventures while coming to the United States to escape a war ravaged country" teaching her grandchildren about justice and freedom. (Malo & Bullard, 2000). Teachers who tell personal stories about their past or present lives model for students the way to recall sensory detail. Listeners can relate the most vivid images from the stories they have heard or share a memory the story has evoked . (Teaching Storytelling, 2000).

Haven (2007) explains that in 350 research studies on the use of storytelling in fifteen separate fields of science, in each study the authors agreed to the premise that stories are both an efficient and an effective instrument "for teaching, for motivating, and for general communication of factual information, concepts and tacit information." The facts about how plants and animals develop, how numbers work, or how government policy influences history--any topic, for that matter--can be incorporated into story

form and made more memorable if the listener takes the story to heart. (Teaching Storytelling, 2000).

In order to use storytelling to effectively teach concepts among other disciplines, it is of paramount importance that a teacher begins with an appropriate essential question. It should be a question that matters to students both in the present and in the future, that can create enduring understandings of the disciplinary topic under study, and that should be open-ended and arguable. (Wilhelm, 2012).

Research from the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada has found direct correlations between early exposure to storytelling and later success in mathematics. O'Neill, Pierce and Pick (2004) explain that there is a relationship between early preschool narrative abilities, particularly in students' abilities to identify the main ideas of the story and the thoughts and feelings of the characters, and later mathematical achievement. This is explained in the discussion of O'Neill et al.'s study by stating that "reasoning about mathematical relationships between mathematical (abstract) objects is no different from reasoning about human relationships between people." This is a concept practiced when listening to and analyzing story. The study argues that the human brain uses the same processes for mathematical relationships that are used when navigating interpersonal relationships and working through the construction of a narrative. (O'Neill et al., 2004).

An excellent example of how storytelling can be used in a multidisciplinary setting can be seen in the YouTube instructional videos of math teacher Tyler Binkley from Palmyra Middle School in Pennsylvania. Binkley uses a collection of videos that teach math concepts as varied as simplifying fractions, the area of a circle and combining like terms. According to Dreon, Kerper and Landis, even though Binkley's "videos are instructional in nature, each video also tells a humorous story that involves a host of characters and has a distinct plot. Although [Binkley's] online videos focus on teaching important math concepts, the stories are what ultimately engage his students." (Dreon, Kerper & Landis, 2011).

Practical Application for Storytelling

When it is understood that storytelling is an important and effective method for teaching students about concepts in history and across other disciplines, the next step is to understand how to use this tool effectively. There are differences between a description of events and the telling of a story. For example, stating that Hernan Cortes and his Spanish conquistadors arrived in Mexico in 1519, that he and his soldiers were forced out of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan in 1520 is a listing of events, it isn't a story. It isn't something that will spark the imagination of students and help them build connections by associating memories and feelings with the plight of the people involved in the events. As is explained by Haven (2007), "everything is not a story - but it could become one."

In the previously stated example, events are listed. They could be memorized, but will likely only survive in the mind for as long as they are needed for the upcoming test, and then they will be forgotten. The material could be covered so much more effectively when used in the format of a story. The story of the Spanish arrival could be told of in the meeting between Cortes and Aztec emperor Moctezuma. The story

could be told either from the perspective of Aztecs who saw the pale, bearded men of the east as the coming to pass of Aztec prophecy, or from that of the Spaniards who witnessed the human sacrifice and cannibalism practiced by the Aztecs for the first time and put Moctezuma in chains in an effort to bend the powerful Aztecs to their will. In establishing a narrative for the Spanish conquest, "we impose the order of story structure on the chaos of existence." (Gottschall, 2014).

Understanding that the use of story is an effective pedagogical tool to assist in the teaching of a concept, teachers need to understand who they are delivering that story to and that the student is always their primary audience. One of the most effective methods of understanding how to effectively use a story to help generate engagement and retention of class material is to always remember to keep in mind the audience. If the audience of a presentation is twenty five adolescents, it is important to make sure that the story touches on emotions, particularly those that make them laugh, and that the story moves rapidly from its slower paced spaces, which are more heavily content oriented, to its higher paced spaces, which touch on students thoughts and feelings. According to Garr Reynolds (2014), it is important to remember that "your story [the one that you are trying to tell] is actually *their* story." That is how your message finds resonance with an audience.

There are a great number of parallels between how teachers instruct students about how to write a story, and the ways that teachers can use storytelling to actually deliver the instructional material. Similar to when teaching students to write a narrative story as a class assignment, those same elements are the one's that help create a story that will create resonance and retention with the stories told to teach a concept. A great opening "hook" will bring the audience in and help them create meaning from the lesson being learned. (Reynolds, 2014).

A good storyteller moves between moments of high intensity when telling a story, to moments of low intensity, to alternate between grabbing the listener's attention and allowing them to process information. Dallas news reporter Dave Lieber explains that in telling a story, the reason that it resonates in the human brain is that the story fires up the neurons at its high points, and allows the listener of the story to learn how to overcome struggle and failure in order to achieve a goal. (Lieber, 2013). This was a strategy used by prehistoric humans as they learned about survival while listening to stories in caves, and is a strategy that has been developing in human brains for longer than the written word, and some argue even longer than spoken language. "Evolutionary biologists confirm that 100 000 years of reliance on stories have evolutionarily hardwired a predisposition into human brains to think in story terms." (Haven, 2007).

When developing the story that you want to tell, regardless of the time frame that exists for you to be able to tell it, it is important to remove everything that is superfluous. Reynolds talks about the theory of Chekhov's gun, explaining that Anton Chekhov wrote that if there is a gun hanging on the wall in chapter one, it had better be going off in chapter two or three, and one of the main ways to make an idea stick is to do something unexpected (Reynolds, 2014).

Story is riveting, story is powerful, and storytelling is an excellent way that educators can help engage their students in course material across multiple disciplines. Nothing

in human experience holds human attention, hooks human attention, like a story. A study in the United States explains that more than four hours per day is spent in front of a screen in pursuit of stories, whether they be news stories, sports stories or crime stories. They can be found in movies, television broadcasts and now in video games. (Gottschall, 2014). Most importantly, when delivering a story to help engage students and have them retain information, the effective storyteller makes their audience feel something. Whether it be sadness, laughter, shock or anger, emotions touch the parts of the human experience that engage us and help us retain particular content. (Reynolds, 2014).

Conclusion

As a species, human beings crave story. Over millennia of evolution, our brains have been wired to think in the cause and effect relationships that have been taught to us through story, and our memories retain information learned through story better than in many other pedagogical methods. Learners, particularly those who are reluctant or struggle with literacy, can become engaged by an effective storyteller. History lends itself particularly well to the process of teaching through story, as the past is filled with rich and inspiring stories of the people and places who have shaped the world in which we live. Story can be used across disciplines, and there are close relationships between students who learn through story and those that experience success in a wide array of disciplines.

Upon those ancient hoodoos of Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park is carved the story of the thunderbird, who foretells of the coming spring through the flap of his wings, the lightning exposing the danger of his claws. (Derworiz, 2014). The centuries old petroglyphs and pictographs survive long after those who created them left their own earthly existence. In this, the astute observer can see the allegory for the storyteller. Long after the teller has left, it is the story that remains in the mind and the memories of the listener.

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