

ShaggyDog Storytellers Club

TEACHERS ARE UNAWARE OF THE VALUE OF ORAL STORYTELLING IN ADULT EDUCATION

“Tell me a fact and I’ll learn, Tell me a truth and I’ll believe, Tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.” – Indian Proverb

“Stories are expert systems for storing, linking, and readily accessing information whenever a new situation calls for it.” - John Seely Brown (1989),
Director of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Centre

The **Proverb** comes directly from the oral tradition, the old fashioned way of learning.

The **Quotation** comes directly from the written tradition, the relatively modern way of learning.

This Proverb has survived for hundreds if not thousands of years before it was ever written down. Told by people to each other, from generation to generation. No one knows who first said it. It doesn’t matter. The Proverb expresses an essential truth and will remembered long after those of us in this room have turned to dust.

I doubt you will remember what John Seely Brown wrote, only a few years ago, 5 minutes after you leave this room. Yet I’ll guarantee you that you will get more marks on a college or university essay for a reference to John Seely Brown than you would for a reference to an old Indian Proverb.

Just imagine the scene.

It’s now a month after you’ve handed in your assignment. All the long hours reading books and articles until your eyes bled and brain hurt are over. All those days spent writing your life away are now just a fading, unpleasant memory. You are now staring at the envelope containing your marked assignment with a strange mixture of dread and excitement.

You tear the envelope open and read what the teacher has said about your masterpiece.

Pencilled in the margins it says, “Interesting idea and the proverb made me think.....”.

This is quite good you think to yourself smugly, and you read on but there’s a **but** “..... but your arguments would be more credible and carry more weight if you had included a reference.”

“Bugger”, you think to yourself, knowing that the pencilled comment was code for “I don’t believe you did any research.”

A triumph of the written tradition over the oral in our modern education system.
But is the Quotation better than the Proverb?

Both statements are expressing the same idea; that stories are fundamental to way humans learn. Both statements are correct.

Which one makes your heart sing? Which one makes your heart sink?

“Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories.” (Mary Catherine Bateson). This assertion now seems self-evident to me. Stories allow us make sense of what we are learning, giving it structure and context. They help us remember. There is an increasing body of evidence to support this view. (Bateson, 1994; Coles, 1989; Finnegan, 1994; Hasselbring, 1992; Honan, 1990; McLellan, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, Norman, 1993; Pennington & Hastie, 1991)

But I took a lot of convincing and I’ve noticed a similar resistance from other teachers, I wondered why? The modern adult education system appears to me to be firmly rooted in the written word, reading what others have written and writing reports about it. The oral tradition of storytelling appears to be neglected except in the area of teaching children. I know that adults also need stories and by neglecting storytelling when teaching adults we are missing an opportunity.

Once upon a time, before literacy became commonplace, the storyteller was an important man in our society. In Anglo Saxon England, the Storyteller or Scop (pronounced Shop) was second only to the chieftain in power and prestige. Storytellers were held in awe by the people because of their almost magical ability to remember, retell and so pass on all the collected wisdom, knowledge and heritage of the people. And they did it in an entertaining way. In fact another word for Storyteller was “Gleeman”.

The word I use for them is **teacher**.

A Teacher with high status, power and students who want to learn! Wow!
You don’t believe me?

Read “Deor”, a story about a renowned and powerful Scop who lost his job, first told by an unknown teacher sometime around 750AD but not written down until circa 1000, in the Exeter Book.

You will see that the tale I tell is true.

(I’m offering a prize for anyone who can tell me how to reference that!)

Clearly, long ago the oral tradition was pre-eminent; in fact for much of human history it was the only form of education. What has changed? It is my argument that the reason that storytelling and the oral tradition are neglected in modern education is due to an unconscious prejudice that is deeply engrained within the system. So deeply engrained that it is not even noticed by most of us. We have forgotten the value an all-inclusive oral tradition that speaks to all of us.

Bateson wrote of the modern education system, stating that “Most higher education is devoted to affirming the traditions and origins of an existing elite and transmitting them to new members.”

I would go further than that and say that is true not just in education but society as whole.

The invention of writing spelled the beginning of the end for the storyteller and the oral tradition. Only the rich and powerful could afford the luxuries of paper and writing materials. Only the rich and powerful could afford the time to learn to read and write. The meaning of the term educated became synonymous with being literate. And only the elite in society were literate. Culture was described in terms of High culture and Low culture. "High" meaning better. Stories that were written down became Literature and highly valued. Stories that had passed from person to person, generation to generation were relegated to the status of "Folk Tales" and therefore of little value. They were fit only to entertain the children. The fact that children have little status and no power in society only served to reinforce the view that stories have little value. No adult wants to be thought of as childish, it would diminish their status and power. A vicious circle if ever there was one.

You could say that in the Past, Power and Prejudice Precluded the Peasant from Proper education. My 6 P's.

To put it bluntly it is just plain snobbery that keeps storytelling largely confined to the nursery and primary school education system.

So much for the Past.

What about the Present?

The 6 P's are still here but things are starting to change. We are in a period of experimentation, expanding our understanding of what education is and what it is for, of how our brains work and how we learn. Barriers are gradually coming down as both society and education become more inclusive. There is recognition that one size does not fit all. Reflective Practice is all the rage. We are all examining own practice and the practice that surrounds us.

Just to make sure there is no misunderstanding, it is important to say that it is not my contention that anything is wrong with the written tradition or that the Oral tradition is better. Reading and Writing are fundamental to our society. My point has been that precisely because reading and writing are so important to our culture we may not even be conscious that the oral tradition offers rich rewards for education if used in the proper context.

And Context is key.

There is a story from the First World War about an Army Officer who wanted to attack so he sent a message down the line saying ""Send reinforcements we're going to advance!" He relied on his men to pass it on verbally. But by the time the message got to his Commander, the message had become ""Send Three and Four Pence, We're going to a Dance!"

This story illustrates the value of the written tradition in the passage of accurate information but I have also used it to illustrate how an oral story can be used to make learning memorable, to go beyond surface learning.

A clue to why stories are so useful in this context comes from our modern understanding of how memory works.

Professor Keiran Egan (1989) at Simon Fraser University suggests that memory is unstable, humans forget things and more importantly what people do remember is affected by emotions, thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears etc. (*“Memory, Imagination, and Learning: Connected by the Story,” Phi Delta Kappan, February 1989, pp. 455–59*).

The telling of stories is more likely to affect those areas of memory than reading a list of facts or listening to someone read a list of facts displayed on a PowerPoint presentation.

It is not a question of written is better than oral or vice versa. It is a question of “Horses for Courses”.

So much for the Past and the Present.

What about the Future?

All of us in this room are the future, or at least part of the future.

Assuming that if you did have unconscious resistance to the idea of storytelling, I hope it has now been dispelled.

I would invite you to think about what stories are really good at.

I believe the list would include:

Stories can create interest and promote engagement with the lesson.

Stories are useful for conveying complex concepts in an understandable and structured way.

Stories give shape and meaning to experiences

Stories are a natural and familiar way to communicate

Stories can foster a sense of community and identity

Stories build rapport.

It is now up to us to explore areas in your teaching where you could take advantage of the strengths of the oral tradition to improve our practice.

Consider this quote from a computer scientist:

“In the end all we have..are stories and methods of finding and using those stories.“

(Schank, Roger C. *Tell me a story: A new look at real and artificial memory*.

New York, NY: Charles Scribner, 1990.)

...if he could find a use for stories, I'm sure you can!

Once upon a time what happened did happen – and if it had not happened, you would never have heard this story.

In an office not far away, a man who believed himself to be a teacher met a storyteller who WAS a teacher. They began to talk. They exchanged the usual pleasantries, and before long the conversation turned to matters of work. The man told the storyteller that he felt he was missing something. “I wrote this great lesson for my students but I can’t make them understand. Can you help me?”

The storyteller replied, “Come and listen to some stories.”

The man laughed and said, “No, I’m serious, I need help to make them understand. Stories are Kid’s stuff”.

But the storyteller just smiled a knowing smile.

The man took the storyteller to be a mad woman and he left the office....quickly.

A week later the man who believed he was a teacher met the storyteller again. He still suspected the storyteller was mad but he was worried and what the hell, he had 5 minutes to kill. It was worth a shot. “I wrote a great lesson and gave them a cool handout to read but I can’t make them understand. Can you help me?”

The storyteller replied, “Come and listen to some stories.”

The man laughed and said, “No, I’m serious, I need help to make them understand. Stories are Kid’s stuff”.

But the storyteller just smiled a knowing smile.

Now the man knew the storyteller was a mad woman and he left the office....quickly.

A week later the man who believed he was a teacher met the storyteller for a third time.

By now the man was pulling his hair out. “I wrote a great lesson and gave them a cool handout to read and an all singing all dancing PowerPoint presentation....with animated letters and everything but I can’t make them understand. Can you help me?”

The storyteller replied, “Come and listen to some stories.”

Absolutely convinced that the storyteller was a mad woman but desperate and suspecting that he too was going slightly mad the man finally gave in and agreed to listen to the stories.

He listened to tales of wonder and woe, truth and tragedy, fantasy and reality and he listened until he hungered for more.

And then he understood. He had found what he was missing. He still wrote his lessons, he still required his students to read, and he still used Powerpoint (occasionally). In fact he did everything he did before but now he also told his students stories.

And they understood.

The man who believed himself a teacher now really was a teacher.

And the storyteller just smiled a knowing smile.

The story I’ve just told you is true, or at least nearly true. I know because it is my story. It is the story of how my initial resistance to the idea of stories being an aid to teaching was overcome.

That was my story. What will yours be?

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