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## Is narrative an endangered species in schools? Secondary pupils' understanding of 'storyknowing'

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Abstract:	<p>This paper argues that narrative knowledge (or 'storyknowing') is marginalized within the English school system, because it is misunderstood and often not recognized as knowledge. We track the changing status of storytelling through some key moments in recent educational history, particularly focusing on its gradual erosion during the progressive era, the onset of the National Curriculum (despite the impact of the National Oracy Project), and the post-2000 period with its conflicting drives towards compliance and creativity.</p> <p>To understand the consequences of this marginalization, we build up a picture of the value of nature of narrative knowledge, drawing firstly on the body of theorists who have investigated narrative. We then look to our long-term practice research with three groups of 'low-ability' 11-14-year-old pupils, in particular their own observations on storytelling made during a focus group. Both sources lead us to challenge the currently dominant perception that pupils listening to a whole narrative are in a passive role. Indeed, we provide evidence that reasserting the value of storyknowing may restore aspects of agency, autonomy and knowledge creation to both teachers and pupils which may not be afforded by overtly 'active' learning strategies. We conclude by considering the conditions in which storyknowing, as characterized by the pupils and theorists, might flourish within schools.</p>

Is narrative an endangered species in schools? Secondary pupils' understanding of "storyknowing"

Abstract

This paper argues that narrative knowledge (or ‘storyknowing’) is marginalized within the English school system, because it is misunderstood and often not recognized as knowledge. We track the changing status of storytelling through some key moments in recent educational history, particularly focusing on its gradual erosion during the progressive era, the onset of the National Curriculum (despite the impact of the National Oracy Project), and the post-2000 period with its conflicting drives towards compliance and creativity.

To understand the consequences of this marginalization, we build up a picture of the value of nature of narrative knowledge, drawing firstly on the body of theorists who have investigated narrative. We then look to our long-term practice research with three groups of ‘low-ability’ 11-14-year-old pupils, in particular their own observations on storytelling made during a focus group. Both sources lead us to challenge the currently dominant perception that pupils listening to a whole narrative are in a passive role. Indeed, we provide evidence that reasserting the value of storyknowing may restore aspects of agency, autonomy and knowledge creation to both teachers and pupils which may not be afforded by overtly ‘active’ learning strategies. We conclude by considering the conditions in which storyknowing, as characterized by the pupils and theorists, might flourish within schools.

Introduction

*Narrative endangered?*

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9 In Matthew Anderson's novel set during the heady days of the Enlightenment in Boston, *The Astonishing*  
10 *Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation* (2006), an infant African prince is bought by a group of  
11 philosopher-scientists and made the subject of an experiment: if given a Classical education, can he  
12 attain the intellectual level of a European? He is guided through (and enchanted by) the literary works  
13 of every great author from Homer to Virgil, as well as his tutors' anecdotes and observations about life,  
14 and his achievements are pronounced a great success. Eventually, however, the group is taken over by  
15 a strict rationalist, Mr Sharpe, who contends that the experiment proves nothing: the boy comes from a  
16 "storytelling people", and all his tutors have done is gorged him with more stories. In order to prove the  
17 development of his rational intellect, he puts Octavian on an exclusive diet of small fragments of difficult  
18 text, to be judged on the basis of the accuracy of his translations, and his deductions from them.  
19 Deprived of narrative, Octavian becomes more and more isolated, and uncertain in his speech. It is this  
20 that starts to break his spirit and complete his enslavement, as the book spirals towards its harrowing  
21 conclusion.

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35 Such intentional suppression of narrative may be rare in the real world, and inherently bound up in the  
36 racial politics of slavery which the author wishes to elucidate. Yet the effects, and the power dynamics,  
37 of Mr Sharpe's policy are a clarion starting point for this paper, in investigating whether the cumulative  
38 effects of English education policy may have unwittingly led to a similar exclusion of narrative.

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Authors arguing that story should occupy a place at the top table in both primary and secondary schools  
– not simply as an occasional entertainment or enrichment activity, but as an integral part of learning –  
include Bruner (1986, 1996, 2006), Daniel (2012), Goodson et al (2010), Prentice (1998), Roney (2009),  
Rosen (1988, 1993), Ryan (2008), and Zipes (1995, 2004). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, storytellers

gained substantial ground in making this case within the National Oracy Project (Howe and Johnson 1992).

Yet most teachers in 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms rarely tell or read an uninterrupted narrative to their pupils, even in English or humanities lessons. The apparent passivity of a listening class fits ill within lessons planned for pace and demonstrable progress in learning skills, and with currently dominant logics of measurement, audit and accountability. The same is largely true of pupils' own storytelling, often regarded as a distraction from the curriculum material to be covered rather than an enrichment of it: Harold Rosen's observation that 'the further up the school system we go, the less likely is it that spontaneous, pupil-made narrative will be able to insert itself comfortably and naturally into the flow of talk' (Howe and Johnson 1992: 20) remains valid.

*The story of a collaboration*

Our practice research was in many ways typical of the school-based storytelling projects initiated or observed by the above proponents of narrative. We worked in a long-term partnership between class teacher (YYY) and storyteller (XXX), like that proposed by Zipes (1995), in which XXX told stories and led over 25 storytelling workshops with YYY's 'low-ability' Key Stage 3 (11-14-year-old) humanities classes, at a school in a predominantly white working-class area. Our workshops involved a mixture of storytelling by XXX; storytelling and discussion by the pupils, YYY and other staff; and collaborative creative response activities such as drama, poetry, art and poster-making.

*In the beginning.* Our collaboration arose initially out of our existing acquaintance, YYY inviting XXX to lead one workshop with each of her three small classes, to give the pupils an experience of oral

storytelling. It was not her intention to continue storytelling work beyond this initial one-off visit. However the pupils, often disruptive and difficult to engage, were so absorbed and intrigued by the stories, and so full of questions afterwards, that we were spurred to consider an ongoing practice research collaboration. We sought to develop a model of storytelling practice that responded to the needs of these 'low-ability' pupils, and to understand what and how pupils learned through storytelling. We established a rhythm of twice-termly sessions with each class, and planned our work together in response to the classes' developing needs and interests. In order to justify this time commitment, and to investigate how storytelling might support pupils' learning, we linked the workshops to the pupils' curriculum. Initially, YYY had sufficient flexibility to allocate time to these sessions because her pupils' additional learning needs made them partially exempt from the curriculum requirements stipulated for other classes. This collaboration became the cornerstone of XXX's two-year residency at the school, which also comprised short-term projects in some mainstream classes, a lunchtime storytelling club and opportunities for talented young storytellers - described in more detail at (INSERT URL FOR ONLINE PORTFOLIO).

We observed a steady development in the pupils' familiarity with storytelling and story-listening as a social experience, as well as their talents as storytellers and interpreters of stories. Particularly striking was the emergence of one or two especially talented storytellers in each small class, who became in effect co-facilitators of their classmates' learning. Indeed, our observations of the pupils' responses support the arguments made by Bruner (1986, 1996, 2006), Daniel (2012), Goodson et al (2010), Prentice (1998), Roney (2009), Rosen (1988, 1993), Ryan (2008), and Zipes (1995, 2004) for storytelling, ranging from the higher level of language pupils employed during storytelling, to the expression and thinking skills it generated, to its ability to engage even usually unmotivated young people, to improved

relationships and communication between teachers and pupils, to the nourishment of pupils' imaginations and empathy, to the value of narrative communication as a life skill.

*A workshop in the life.* A single workshop will exemplify the knowledge that was explored and shared through storytelling. When one class studied 'rainforests' as a topic, XXX first asked YYY, and then the pupils, to share their most powerful memories of trees and forests. Out of the moment of silence and the somewhat 'wooded' atmosphere that followed this, she moved on to tell them the story of an indigenous Indonesian chief who was approached by government officials to sell his people's land for logging, to make space for poor tenant farmers. The pupils, without exception, listened avidly for fifteen minutes, until XXX paused at a crucial point. They then experimented with their own endings to the story (many were by now confident storytellers). YYY did not intervene to shape their conclusions, but made her own contribution in her turn. At first these endings were optimistic, but as the pupils played out the power dynamics of the interactions between loggers, forest people, tenant farmers, experts and officials, the likelihood of the forest's destruction hit them. They were visibly deflated by this conclusion. In response XXX had nothing to offer them but another story – that of the Huaorani people of Ecuador (Kane 1996) - which had been important to her in her own adolescence; it had helped her express her grief at ecological destruction, but also to understand that, even where victory is impossible, persistence and solidarity can start to build a movement which can shift society's ideas. We went online to research the work of Survival International, supporting indigenous peoples worldwide to defend at least parts of their homeland. XXX's field notes record that

*They are full of questions about this [...] I feel strangely like a university lecturer, pointing the pupils to further references, not a storyteller in an 'intervention' class. (20/11/2014)*

Each storytelling workshop was different and surprising, but the pupils' sophisticated, emotionally engaged, reflective engagement in the issues raised by this story was typical.

*The writing on the wall.* However, the ongoing story of our collaboration is itself illustrative of the problematic status of storytelling in secondary schools. During our second year of collaboration, the Inclusion Department within which YYY taught came under increasing pressure to align its curriculum planning and assessment regime with that in the rest of the school. Arguably, the storytelling session described above did not directly help the pupils meet their attainment targets. While it gave them a contextual, narrative grasp of the complexities and power dynamics of particular forest dwellers' lives, it did not generate a list of generalizable facts about rainforests; while the pupils engaged with persuasive language, this did not always demonstrate that they had acquired the transferable skill of constructing an argument. Moreover, the storytelling took valuable time away from activities which might have proved these skills efficiently. Thus YYY felt she had to take pains to ensure the extent of our collaboration remained 'under the radar'. In her words,

*We have a set amount of topics we are expected to cover and this often means there is insufficient time to study anything in any depth. Using time in storytelling could be construed by some as 'wasting time'. (01/06/2015)*

Meanwhile, XXX's other projects in the school were struggling, despite good will by many teachers, to compete for limited curriculum time, financial resources and teacher support. Feedback from staff was that they perceived a great potential benefit to the storytelling projects, for the young people's development as writers and citizens, but that there was insufficient direct relevance to the curriculum as currently defined. Indeed, the rainforest workshop was one of the last sessions we held with YYY's



Inclusion classes; the following academic year, cost savings meant that they were absorbed into larger mainstream classes, whose teacher did not see a justifiable role for storytelling.

*Structure of article*

Our collaboration thus gave rise to several important contextual questions, which this article seeks to answer:

1. What determines the status of storytelling and narrative knowledge in classrooms? Is its fate intertwined with particular educational traditions, or initiatives such as the National Oracy Project (1987-1992) or post-2000 'creativity' agenda?
2. What is lost when narrative knowledge is sidelined in education?
3. How, and why, might we increase the presence of narrative in classrooms?

Thus our literature review first addresses question 1 by tracing the changing fortunes of storytelling through certain key periods in the last century of educational history. Turning to question 2, it then synthesises a different body of theoretical literature to take a closer look at narrative knowledge or 'storyknowing' itself: can we build an 'anatomical' understanding of its mechanisms and value?

Such an account, based on theorists' perspectives, may go some way to redressing the fragile position of narrative knowledge, yet it seems very distant from classroom realities. We therefore provide original data from a focus group with some of the pupils involved in our practice research, which gives insight into their own perceptions of the nature of storytelling and narrative knowledge.

Bringing together these three strands, we then conclude by discussing question 3.

### Literature review: the history of storyknowing in education

The status of story and narrative in schooling at all levels has undoubtedly varied with dominant educational ideologies; to take the most immediate example, our own partnership had to end because of the extension of a target-based approach to even the 'lowest-ability' pupils. We therefore divide our investigation into overlapping 'moments': (1) before and (2) during the 'progressive' or 'child-centred' era, (3) the onset of the National Curriculum, and (4) the most recent decade during which a compliance and target-led agenda has been strongly dominant. We will look for the language of overt ideologies, and also, where possible, for indications of the strength or weakness of what we might call the 'narrative voice' within everyday classroom communication in each 'moment'. This excavation will necessarily need to complement evidence with some educated guesswork, and set aside the inevitable variation between individual classrooms, schools and regions; we also focus primarily on humanities education. However, we contend that it is possible to identify factors affecting the viability of the storytelling exchange in classrooms.

#### *Moment 1: before the progressive era*

A logical place to start is the influential literature aimed at helping teachers and librarians become oral storytellers, which flourished during the first half of the twentieth century, in particular Marie Shedlock's *The Art of the Storyteller* (1915), Anna Cogswell Tyler's *Twenty-Four Unusual Stories for Boys*

and *Girls* (1921), and Ruth Sawyer's *The Way of the Storyteller* (1942). (This lineage can may be said to persist in numerous more recent but perhaps more 'niche' books by storyteller-librarian-teachers such as Eileen Colwell (e.g. 1969, 1977, 1980) and Mary Medlicott (e.g. 1989), and secondary school English teacher Betty Rosen (1988, 1993).) Ryan (2008) attests that the influence of these works was such that a weekly story hour became widespread in many pre-1960s classrooms, including some secondary schools. Strikingly, these books address a potential storyteller who may need to develop their confidence or skills in remembering, choosing or telling age-appropriate stories, but who does not need to be convinced of the value of storytelling itself.

There may be several reasons for this, not least that, for teachers facing large classes, with limited resources and often mixed age ranges, storytelling's ability to absorb children made it an excellent, cheap and engaging behaviour management strategy. Moreover, until the 1950s, as Lowe (2007) documents, the curriculum itself was seen as a 'secret garden' within the control of schools and teachers, almost entirely beyond government interference. Teachers, rather than information resources such as books, were often the primary vessels of knowledge and it was up to them to decide how best to convey it to pupils. Bruner recalls his own science teacher in the 1920s as epitomizing this role of guide and conduit:

In effect, she was inviting me to extend my world of wonder to encompass hers. She was not just informing me. She was, rather, negotiating the world of wonder and possibility [...] She was a human event, not a transmission device. (1986: 126)

Subjects such as history, in particular, were taught through a strongly narrative approach. While there were tensions between the 'great tradition' of teaching the lives of 'great men and women' and the idea of historical training and skills, Sylvester (1994) states that until the 1960s, in history teaching,

Methodology remained largely unchanged. Teachers gave oral accounts of the main events, putting notes on a blackboard for pupils to copy or expand. Or textbooks were read, often around the class, to secure the main factual outline [...] Often this was followed by pupils writing prose accounts or essays as long as they could manage on the main topics on the syllabus. (12)

That is, pupils heard or read a narrative, then retold it in their own words. Their understanding was built up through guided crossings over the landscape of human history. It goes without saying that there were limitations to this approach and the epistemology it implied. Such classrooms may have allowed relatively little space for pupils to challenge dominant narratives, at least out loud, or for the collaborative story-making into which YYY's pupils entered so thoughtfully. However, crucially, they did tend to place the teacher in the autonomous, embodied role of storyteller, and gave pupils the opportunity for free-roaming, absorbed listening and private sense-making.

#### *Moment 2: the progressive tradition*

The values of many teachers and educationalists in the 1960s-1980s, as celebrated in Doddington and Hilton's (2007) retrospective examination of the progressive or child-centred tradition, seem at first glance to be hospitable territory for storytelling. A constructivist view of learning, emphasising talk and collaborative sense-making, nurturing relationships between teacher and pupils, developmental appropriateness, interdisciplinarity, creative responses and a priority for meaning over information, undoubtedly gave teachers such as Betty Rosen (1988, 1993) the freedom and justification to incorporate storytelling into their classes. Indeed, the principles YYY absorbed during her own training

and early teaching career during this period are a key motivation for her to retain a central role for the informal narrative voices of both teachers and pupils in her humanities teaching. Zipes (2004) explicitly identifies his influential school-based storytelling programmes as manifestations of an increasingly threatened progressive philosophy of education, emphasising the empowerment and critical literacy of young people.

However the progressive era's democratic focus on the child's voice, experiential learning, play and freedom, undoubtedly also discouraged many teachers from embracing the apparently authoritarian role of storyteller. Returning to the example of history, the Schools Council History Project (1976) undoubtedly lessened the role of narrative in teaching when it established that 'Pupils were "to do" history, not merely receive it' (Sylvester 1994: 10). The word 'merely' succinctly expresses this period's prevalent perception that listening to a lengthy narrative rendered pupils passive and subservient.

The picture becomes yet more complex when we consider what Lowe (2007) describes as the 'new sociology of education' which emerged during this period, which started to examine the effectiveness of teachers' strategies in terms of specific educational goals and outcomes:

Implicit in their work was the argument that without much closer definition of what it was that the teacher was seeking to impart or convey, the whole process of educating was at best ill-defined (54).

The curriculum was no longer to be a 'secret garden' but a means of achieving societal goals which could be scrutinized and set in the public sphere. The mood this created was suspicious of storytelling, with its unpredictable and intersubjective knowledge outcomes, and favoured more obviously active or conversational forms of communication, in which pupils could demonstrate their conceptual

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8 understanding. It is notable that Rosen, writing of her work in the 1970s and 1980s, unlike earlier  
9 advocates of storytelling in schools, feels the need to make an explicit case for the value of story. She  
10 reassures readers that pupils will learn something from it:  
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15 On every occasion – without exception – that I have told a story in someone’s classroom I am  
16 told of this child or that who has never before sat so still, listening; and on every occasion –  
17 again, without exception – in written follow-up work, there will be pupils excelling themselves  
18 in quantity and in quality where they would normally produce nothing or a reluctant little.  
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21 (1993: 35)  
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26 Story now needed to prove its usefulness. However Rosen’s argument is instrumental only in that she  
27 claims that storytelling will motivate reluctant pupils; she does not yet feel that her readers will require  
28 persuasion that it will achieve specific learning outcomes. In this sense her position is a revealing bridge  
29 into the period in which the National Curriculum was being written, imposed and contested.  
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### 37 *Moment 3: the National Curriculum and National Oracy Project (1987-1993)*

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40 To understand how the tussle to shape the overarching and subject-specific goals of schooling sidelined  
41 storyknowing, we can look again to the example of the history curriculum, as laid out by Peter Lee  
42 (1992). Lee identified opposing pulls to make history a means to objective outcomes, either of societal  
43 transformation, personal and social skills, or a renewed patriotism based on canonical knowledge. Both  
44 endangered the true nature of the subject, which was ‘something which expands our whole picture of  
45 what ends may be possible’ (22) – almost a definition of storyknowing.  
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Moreover, these increasingly vexed and instrumentalized debates on curriculum made it more difficult for teachers to inhabit the embodied role of storyteller: a guide to knowledge speaking from one's own experience and personal directives. Indeed, there was what Lowe describes as a 'widespread sense [...] that teachers were becoming the deliverers of other people's messages rather than [...] the arbiters of what went on in the schools' (2007: 98). Rosen feels it necessary to reiterate the value of teachers' experience and agency:

Teachers' voices must be heard, however, even against all the odds and oddities of officialdom. [...] And our voices are at their best telling stories, our own stories and stories we have made our own. (1993: 3)

Meanwhile, there is evidence that the National Curriculum impacted on the everyday communication between pupils and teachers, including their informal storytelling. Alexander (1990) describes language in primary schools as 'a predominantly oral culture [...] a spoken language which is immediate, idiosyncratic and ephemeral, metaphoric and allusive' (1990: 74-75). The imposition onto this world of the new formal, target-based language of the Curriculum was a shock to many teachers at both primary and secondary level; Lowe (2007) cites a teacher who wrote to the *Times Educational Supplement* in 1992 to recall that:

When the core subject folders were thrown at teachers three years ago I leafed through the pages and skimmed what was, basically, a new language. Astonished that anybody could really believe that this neat, new system of ticking boxes, compartmentalising and dehumanising education would actually work, I sat back and waited [for the reaction]. (104)

This 'new language' appears inimical to narrative. Yet coincident with the advent of the Curriculum was a new emphasis on speaking and listening through the National Oracy Project (NOP), in which storytellers had a significant presence; many storytellers were busy freelancers in schools during this period, and the NOP even published a storytelling guide for teachers (Howe and Johnson 1992). In addition, edited collections on oracy aimed at teachers and educationalists (Holderness and Lalljee 1998; Norman 1992), as well as a more recent textbook on speaking and listening covering similar ground (Jones and Hodson 2006), each include a chapter on storytelling. It is noteworthy, however, that these three books contain few or no references to storytelling or narrative outside these chapters. Rather, their primary theoretical emphasis is the role of facilitated classroom talk in developing metacognition, and learning within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. The speaking and listening that is to be encouraged is aimed primarily at enabling children (particularly those with additional challenges such as disabilities or membership of a minority group) to work at a higher level of abstraction, and demonstrate that they are doing so.

The rise of oracy at the outset of the National Curriculum perhaps lay in its bringing together progressive and centripetal forces in a cognitive agenda, while also incorporating new emphases on inclusion, diversity and citizenship. However we would argue that the NOP did not have at its centre an appreciation, or even an understanding, of narrative knowledge.

#### *Moment 4: Compliance and creativity (2000s to the present)*

There is nothing intrinsically hostile to narrative in the content of the National Curriculum. However, as Parker (2015) highlights, a generation of teachers have now been trained in an era of circumscribed



autonomy and personal initiative, and schools are increasingly compelled to orient themselves towards compliance with detailed prescriptions. In this climate, both the self-directed role of storyteller and the unfathomable state of listener have arguably become endangered in much of schooling. Because of the fundamental indeterminacy and idiosyncrasy of what a teacher may choose to tell, or a pupil may choose to take from a story, lessons rich in narrative will rarely be the shortest or most predictable route to demonstrating that learning outcomes have been achieved.

Yet it seems vital to examine a simultaneous trend within this period, namely an emphasis on *creativity* in teaching and learning. The 1999 National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) report, commissioned by the New Labour government, recommended that schools should prepare young people for an unpredictable future through a strengthened emphasis on creative education, innovation, and the arts. This was followed by governmental commitments two years later to infuse creativity throughout all education policy (DCMS 2001). Numerous subsequent works guiding teachers in the development of creative approaches to teaching, such as Fautley and Savage (2007), emphasise its focus on ‘higher order’ or ‘convergent’ thinking, interdisciplinarity and non-linear problem-solving (Fautley and Savage 2007). This move might seem fertile ground for storyknowing, given its affinity with complexity, multiple truths and imagination.

Anna Craft (2011) notes that this emphasis on creativity remains strong in English education, for economic, social, and technological reasons. Yet, she says, it is riddled with tensions:

creativity has been seen as increasingly significant in relation to education since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite a powerful set of drivers towards ever-higher achievement on narrower measures [...] perhaps the most visible challenge for creativity in education is the disconnect with performativity. (2011: 20)

Thus, even as moves towards creativity have worked their way through the system, they have been thwarted by countervailing pressures to achieve closely specified outcomes in the shortest possible time. It is perhaps for this reason that the literature on creative teaching contains little or no reference to narrative or story, effectively redefining 'creativity' as a set of highly choreographed strategies which minimize the risk that pupils will fail to arrive at the desired destination. As Fautley and Savage point out,

There can be chance examples of creative decision-making, but in the classroom you will not want to wait for these but pursue a more purposeful course aimed at producing this type of thinking.' (2007: 4)

Such a course may be a lively and active learning experience, but is likely to have very minimal scope for either absorption in a narrative world, or the unpredictability of an exchange of anecdotal experience.

The squeezing out of narrative is occasionally tacitly recognized by the educational establishment itself as an unintended consequence of its own directives; for example OFSTED's *Moving English Forward* (2012) laments that 'excessive pace' in many schools meant that pupils rarely have the chance to enjoy and reflect on whole novels or poems. Indeed, the current moment in UK education might be characterized as an irreconcilable tussle between compliance and creativity, leaving no space for teachers' autonomous sense of what narratives might guide pupils through their lives. As Fautley and Savage themselves admit,

After all, if you are constantly being told what to teach and when and how to teach it, how can you really be expected to be creative as well? This is a good question and one that many teachers are grappling with. (2007: 23)

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Having seen the low tidemark to which narrative and story have fallen in English education, it is time to turn to the literature on narrative knowledge itself, to ‘anatomize’ this endangered species and thus gain a sense of what is being lost.

**Literature review: the theorists’ anatomy of storyknowing**

The distinction between the kind of knowledge that is developed through narrative (termed ‘storyknowing’ in AAA and XXX 2016), and the kind of knowledge which rests on abstraction has been persuasively explored by a body of theorists. Jerome Bruner distinguishes ‘two irreducible modes of cognitive functioning’ (2006: 116): propositional, paradigmatic or logico-scientific knowledge, which ‘seeks explications that are context free and universal’ (116):

*“When temperatures drop below zero, water always freezes because...”*

and narrative knowledge, which ‘seeks explications that are context sensitive and particular’ (116):

*“Well, the winter set in especially hard that year and the lake froze over...”*

Bruner contends that the functioning of narrative is often poorly understood in psychology, education and most other disciplines. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) tries to redress the balance, asserting that narrative is not an underdeveloped attempt to attain ‘scientific’ knowledge, but a viable way of knowing in its own right. Its denigration, he says, limits our understanding of reality to that subset of it which can be understood by the scientific or propositional track.

Other authors who have investigated narrative and propositional knowledge include Walter Benjamin (WB) (1973), Augusto Boal (AB) (1995,2000), Italo Calvino (IC) (1956), Michael de Certeau (MdC) (1984),

Arthur Frank (AF) (1995), Donna Haraway (DH) (1988), Richard Kearney (RK) (2002), Alisdair MacIntyre (AMcl) (1981), Peter Reason and Peter Hawkins (PR/PH) (1988), Paul Ricoeur (PR), and Lev Vygotsky (1967). By reviewing this corpus, we can make the following ‘anatomy’ of the key characteristics of storyknowing:

**Purpose:** *narrative aims to communicate the particular experience of the teller to the community of listeners, in a way that will be relevant to their particular circumstances or needs.*

For Benjamin (1973), story’s task is to convey *experience* meaningfully, rather than facts accurately.

#### Storytelling

does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (91-2)

Arthur Frank goes further, emphasising the inseparability of the storyteller’s whole *person* from their experiential knowledge: ‘their bodies give their stories their particular shape and direction’ (Frank 1995: 27).

Kearney (2002) makes the related point that story conveys perspectives, rather than messages or instructions, enabling us to ‘identify[] with as many fellow humans as possible’ (62). This is not a relativistic, value-neutral role, however. Story does not limit itself to denotative statements, but aims to give ‘counsel’ by guiding listeners along a path already travelled. In Benjamin’s words: ‘every real story [...] contains, openly or covertly, something useful’ (1973: 86). The storyteller must, like a craftsman,

‘fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way’ (108).

Thus storyknowing does not seek to legitimate itself against universal standards of proof or logic (Lyotard 1984), but to share learning which is true and relevant within the particular cultural context of the telling. Crucially, this exchange of life experience and guidance binds together tellers and listeners:

[A] collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence [...] finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts, but also in the act of reciting them’ (Lyotard 1984:22).

**Technique:** *the compositional strategies of story are based on collaboration.*

Knowledge creation through the narrative track relies on both teller and listeners. This is partly because, as Bruner (2006) suggests, the primary driving force of narrative is characters’ intentionality; action is largely interpreted ‘in terms of the working out of human intentions in a real or possible world’ (121). This is in contrast to paradigmatic knowledge, which comes pre-interpreted, usually expressed ‘through the operations of causes, structural requiredness, reasoned correlation’ (121). Moreover, the best stories, affirms Benjamin (1973), are told with the minimum of ‘psychological shading’ or interpretation. We might, for example, be told that the family have to sell their last cow, but not exactly how much they have suffered to get to that point, or why this was the only recourse left to them. Both storyteller and listeners thus have work to do to make sense of the linkages between cause and effect, and this joint task relies on their ability to ‘assign appropriate presuppositional interpretations to what is

being said' (Bruner 2006: 124). During a live telling, this collaboration can be sensed as they respond to each other both verbally and non-verbally.

Elsewhere, XXX (2017) has discussed the flipside of this observation: that where teller and listeners do *not* share cultural common ground and associations, the telling of the story then becomes an opportunity for exploration of each other's assumptions and worldviews, and an intersubjective space for the creation of new shared meanings.

Through succinctness and memorability, narratives allow the listener, in turn, to become the teller and disseminate these shared meanings: 'The cardinal point for the unaffected listener is to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story' (Benjamin 1973:97).

***Epistemology:*** *the knowledge embodied in story is irreducible to categories, labels or general principles.*

There is a fluidity and flexibility to the meanings embodied in stories, which allows a single narrative to contain multiple and even contradictory layers of truth. Stories are not simple metaphors to drive home emphatic messages (although people may occasionally attempt to use them in this way); they are experiences which reveal realities too complex to summarise. De Certeau expresses this beautifully:

You ask what they "mean" ("veulent" dire)? I'll tell them to you again. When someone asked him about the meaning of a sonata, it is said, Beethoven merely played it over.' (1984: 80)

This allows stories to become the containers for exploration of controversial or complex topics. Reason and Hawkins (1998) used storymaking in response to contentious discussions around gender relations within a research group, and found that the narrative knowledge generated 'tentatively feels the way

forward towards a synthesis without artificially creating a compromise, or explaining away the differences' (Reason and Hawkins 1998:95).

**Model of learning:** *the process of building knowledge is cumulative, through exposure to many stories.*

Whereas a scientific theory seeks to encapsulate the totality of a realm of reality in the abstract, narrative knowledge is built up by exchanging multiple stories of what has happened within it. The more complex this realm, the more difficult it will be to encapsulate propositionally, and the more valuable will be a narrative approach:

I do not think that my interest in theatre and literature has made me more *abstract*. Instead, it has joined me to the possible worlds that provide the landscape for thinking about the human condition, the human condition as it exists in the culture in which I live.' (Bruner 1986:128)

De Certeau (1984) expresses this distinction in terms of the difference between a 'route' and a 'map'; many stories of journeys must be told before a map of an area can be compiled, and if these are 'pushe[d] away into its prehistory' (121) once the map has been drawn, a great richness of knowledge can be lost.

We can best appreciate this view of narrative knowledge visually, by imagining human experience as a metaphorical landscape. Rather than seeking to capture the overall shape of this landscape by referring to a standardized map, we can tell stories (here represented as arrows) to share with others our own past journeys through it:

*Figure 1. Stories setting out across a landscape.*



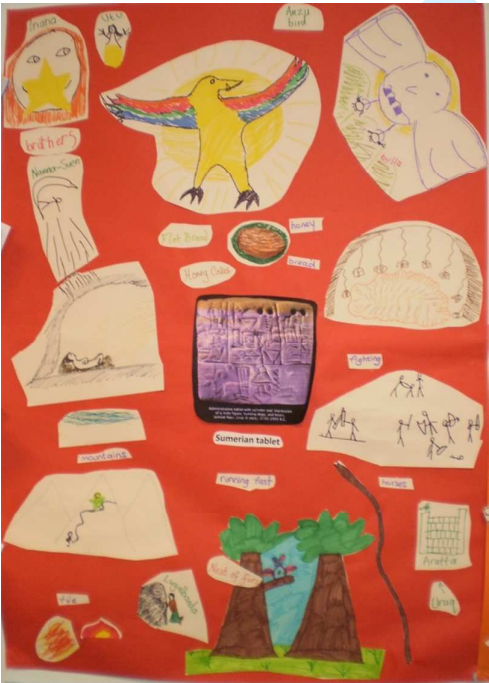
Thus when a storyteller tells a story (the bold arrow), she shares with her listeners her own exploration of this landscape, which will trigger off answering stories (thin arrows) from listeners in which they share their own different explorations of the same landscape. Gradually a more complex picture will start to emerge of what this 'country' of human experience is like.

Thus storyknowing emerges from the literature as a valuable form of knowledge in its own right. We have perhaps, for the sake of clarity, over-emphasised the distinction between narrative and propositional knowledge, and we will examine their interdependence in our discussion of the pupils' observations which follows.



Methodology

So as to elicit the pupils’ observations as to the characteristics of storytelling-based learning, we invited volunteers from the three classes to join us for a loosely structured focus group discussion (18<sup>th</sup> March 2015). The nine pupils that chose to come (three per class) were, unsurprisingly, among those who had shown greatest interest in storytelling and developed most as storytellers during our collaboration. We sat around a table covered with all the artefacts that the three classes had collectively produced based on stories during almost two years of our collaboration, for example:



Figures 2 and 3. Example artefacts from storytelling workshops: a poster retelling the Sumerian myth of Lugalbanda, and a class poem written on the York experience of bubonic plague.

## Year 7: Feelings on the Plague Wagon

(written in response to the story of Folly Mill on Hob Moor in 1603)

We are divided into rich and poor  
We are scared, terrified and shaking  
Will we die, there is no cure  
I heard we should cut the sores to release the pressure  
People are fighting and stealing on the waggon  
We should not steal or we'll go to hell  
Thomas Morton is praying for us  
But who cares its our last day let's just have fun  
In the moonlight we dance around the fire to cheer ourselves up  
Why is god punishing us?  
I don't want to die  
We're missing our dear children  
We did what we could for them  
Left them food, look after to each other, stay hidden  
I'm thankful they are still alive  
But will they survive?

We prompted the pupils with occasional questions as to the differences between facts and stories, or between storytelling lessons and other kinds of lessons. That is, 'other lessons' stood in as a necessary but imperfect proxy for 'propositional knowledge' in this discussion. Paradoxically, we were asking them to discuss narrative in propositional terms, something the pupils found difficult. However the presence of artefacts allowed them to grasp at particular memories so as to make their points as little stories or examples, underlining our observation that the narrative voice has an essential role in allowing pupils to make eloquent contributions to classroom discussion. For example:

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*Dan<sup>1</sup>: When we learn about stuff like this, stuff like history...it's easy to people that knows about it, to tell it...like, we didn't know about this (gestures to poster of Sumerian epic) bird with wings until we heard the story...*

However, many of the pupils clearly enjoyed the challenge of articulating what they found noteworthy about storytelling. When we later provided them with a brief summary of our findings from the discussion, they recognised their own opinions despite the ‘translation’ into general principles. We can compile a second picture of storyknowing by extracting quotations from the transcription of their words, which reveal their reasons for valuing narrative to be somewhat different to those of the theorists.

**Findings and discussion: The pupils’ anatomy of storyknowing**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pupils were primarily interested in articulating what they felt was special about the *experience* of the storytelling exchange, rather than the kind of knowledge that it generated. Four themes emerged in particular.

*Themes: the experience of storytelling*

*The role and craft of the storyteller.* As Sam and Dan’s comments above make clear, the pupils had become intrigued by the practice and strategies of storytelling, in particular how a storyteller researches and crafts stories. Dan asked, ‘*How do you get to know this stuff?*’ and Sam mused on the various routes by which stories entered the class lexicon: ‘*that someone’s made up, or they’ve got from someone else,*

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

or they've learnt, or they've taken their time to, like, remember that story.' In response to this interest, XXX had developed the habit of bringing in her source materials to show them at the beginning of each session.

This interest extended to speculation as to how they had developed, and might further develop, as storytellers themselves. Sam and another pupil (not present) had worked with XXX to prepare a performance in a local festival, and reflected that the experience had '*made me want to be a storyteller when I'm older. That's why I picked drama....*'

*The distinctive social set-up and communication style of storytelling.* Joe and Sam were struck by the difference between the usual classroom environment and the more egalitarian and sociable atmosphere of the storytelling sessions, in which pupils, teaching assistants, teacher and storyteller were all necessary contributors:

*Joe: Instead of your mate being over there – over there – and over there – you just get to chill with them [...]*

Dan agreed that storytelling was '*a more calm way*' of learning.

Maya recognized storytelling as enabling different kinds of communication within the class. She was particularly conscious of the transitions between 'normal' conversation and 'performative' storytelling:

*Don't you feel shy when you, like, stop (at the end of a story) and everyone just stares at you? [...]* I would.

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She and Dan also suggested various ways to develop the group’s storytelling practice, for example by inviting other storytellers to perform for them.

*Stories as shared creations and communal property of the class.* In gesturing to their posters, poems and other collaborative outputs on the classroom wall and on the table, the pupils seemed to be referring to these not simply as collective achievements but as new additions to the canon of knowledge. Thus three pupils, to underline a point about how story engages imagination, offered to retell a particular story which their class had collaboratively written a year previously:

*Sam: Do you want me to read what this says? There’s a boy. He never gives up. He saves people. He’s determined. He imagines dangers. He tries his best. He’s kind, helpful, strong, courageous, a wit.*

Various pupils reflected on how knowledge is created and how they themselves might have a role in this process; they made spontaneous suggestions as to how to share or build on this collection of stories, as if they constituted a corpus.

*Sam: How about we, like, join all of these stories together – you go through a portal...*

*Dan: You could bring more books in, and we could look at what they look like in real...like, in black and white pictures or whatever.*

*The value of absorption in a vivid storyworld.* Perhaps the pupils’ most striking emphasis was on the absorbing and entertaining nature of storytelling, and the freedom to allow one’s mind to roam and

create images within a storyworld. Joe was keen that we should realise that his mind was active and doing valuable work in these moments, though he might appear passive or ‘tuned-out’:

*Joe: It's just – you know when you're telling a story and some of us put our heads down like that (puts head down on folded arms) – it's only because some of us do it to, like, picture the images in our heads.*

Joe contrasted the freedom and solitude of listening to a story with the more coercive nature of usual lessons, which he felt were based around ‘facts’:

*Well facts are, for example, you're about to walk into a wall...that's a fact. And a story is where you just – put your head down and listen.*

Indeed, the pupils’ main critique of our storytelling sessions was that we introduced response activities after XXX’s stories; this felt more in line with ‘usual’ lessons in which they had to prove their understanding. There were vigorous nods all around the table when some pupils reiterated that they learnt more from simply listening to and becoming absorbed in a story.

*Sam: The bad part about it is when the story ends and you start talking about something else...and we're too into the story.*

*Joe: (Rather than response activities or discussion) I would prefer another story.*

*Themes: storyknowing and learning*

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It is when the pupils discuss the absorbing effect of listening to stories that their views do start to touch on the nature of narrative knowledge. In particular, their views illuminate the interrelation between storyknowing and propositional knowledge. Consider Sam’s observation that a sensorily rich storyworld stimulates the imagination of the listener:

*Sam: You can link the story with the lesson. [...] Like say we were learning about World War Two, really good storytellers would explain how the planes were flying over, the sound, the terrain.*

This calls to mind Lev Vygotsky’s (1967) insight that imagination and creativity are combinatorial processes. That is, in order to develop both creative thinking and logical reasoning processes, young people need to build a repertoire of images to draw upon and try out in different combinations, and they can acquire these the narrations of others as much as through first-hand experience. Indeed, YYY expressed her main aspiration for her pupils in relation to our storytelling collaboration as follows: *I hope it will allow them to broaden their (often limited) experiences of life in general* (01/06/2016).

In addition, several pupils, reflecting on the difference between ‘facts’ and ‘stories’, prized how the embedding of events within a storyworld absorbed their interest and helped them to remember things.

*Amos: I remember more stuff if it’s entertaining – if it’s boring I just forget about it, and that’s what normally happens.*

*Sam: Facts, sometimes you get told a fact and later on someone asks you, ‘What was that fact?’ and it’s hard to remember it. Stories – you would probably remember the story, or look it up somewhere. Stories are entertainment – facts are information.*

Maya articulated precisely the 'slow-burning' nature of stories, which remained in the class' collective memory and helped them learn in the longer term:

*And after we went back the other day, after we had the story with you, we learnt lots from the story.*

The pupils' observations in this regard underscore Bruner's call for a 'spiral curriculum', based on a recognition of the interdependency between narrative and propositional thinking in human learning:

the idea that in teaching a subject you begin with an "intuitive" account that is well within the reach of a student, and then circle back later to a more formal or highly structured account.  
(1996: 119)

The 'intuitive' account is invariably a story or an experience that can give rise to a story, and Bruner is quite clear about it: narrative comes first. However it is not simply a rung on the ladder to a better formal understanding; there is also 'commerce in the other direction' (1996:7). Stories are required to make sense of the outputs of our abstract thinking – to understand their significance in relation to the rest of our knowledge, and importantly, in relation to our selves: 'It is only in the narrative mode that one can construct an identity and find a place in one's culture' (1996: 42). In this respect it was striking that the pupils asked to conclude the focus group by creating a 'chain story' together; the fluency and satisfying ending of this funny story showed how storytelling had become our collective 'mother tongue'.

The pupils were most focused on the *experience* of storytelling, while the theorists emphasises the forms of knowledge it embodies. Yet their articulation of this experience in fact complemented the theorists' more epistemological anatomy, by illuminating just *how* storytelling enables storyknowing.



That is, moments of unhurried, solitary *absorption* allow multiple perspectives to circulate in a performative space, before social meanings are agreed upon; and an understanding of the storyteller’s *craft and role* is vital to comprehending the embodied nature of storyknowing.

Taken together, the perspectives of the theorists and the pupils offer an answer to our second question (*What is lost when narrative knowledge is sidelined in education?*) by building up a picture of storyknowing as a coherent form of knowledge, and the storytelling exchange as a particular, recognisable kind of shared experience which enables its development – but one which has become rare in secondary school life.

In conclusion, we deal with our final question: *how, and why, might we increase the presence of narrative in classrooms?*

**Conclusion: Looking around and ahead – the fate of narrative in schools**

*The consequences of the suppression of narrative*

Our research demonstrates the kinds of learning that are endangered when the storytelling voice is sidelined in education, and when storyknowing is not recognized as knowledge. Opportunities for pupils to learn from teachers’ and each other’s experience, to build shared and contextualized understandings of complex themes, to claim and develop their own narrative voice, and to enter empathetically into the worlds of different times and places, become scarce.

It is worth recalling another vignette from our practice research to underline this point. When one of YYY’s classes was studying World War Two, XXX told them her mother-in-law’s experiences as a

frightened child in Germany in 1944, with American soldiers billeted in her house. One pupil, perhaps wishing to redress the balance subtly in favour of the Allied perspective, then contributed his grandfather's experiences of hard work in a munitions factory manufacturing weapons for the same offensive. YYY responded with her own family's feelings while cowering in an air raid shelter, and other pupils joined in with their family stories of the war. Pupils' drawings of these stories portrayed both the victimhood and the aggression of both sides in the war. The different political and experiential perspectives represented in these stories caused no tension; there was no need to establish the general principle that conflicts are many-sided; rather there was a sense of an excess of meaning and empathy that could not be captured in such a principle.

The very positive response of these 'lower-ability' pupils to storytelling also suggests that the suppression of narrative may particularly penalise pupils who are socially or educationally disadvantaged, as well as those from more oral home cultures. This possibility is endorsed by Maybin's (1992) discussion of Heath's (1982) ethnographic research with black working-class children in a school in Trackton, North Carolina. The children struggled with

the fact that teachers' questions so often asked for labels, attributes and discrete features of objects and events in isolation from the context. In the child's community, people asked questions about whole events or objects and their uses, causes and effects; answers usually involved telling a story, describing a situation or making comparisons with other events [...] But this ability to link two situations metaphorically and recreate scenes was not tapped in school – in fact, it could often be a nuisance to the teacher. (77)

Many British teachers would recognize the lack of freedom they have to harness this kind of knowledge in classrooms. If (recalling Joe's and Sam's observations) some pupils feel they are at their *most* creative

or productive when in the free-roaming state of listening to a story, the frequent requirement to prove or name what they have learnt effectively short-circuits this valuable mental process, limiting the depth of pupils' engagement in what they are learning.

*Ideology or longterm decline?*

Fundamentally, the dominant educational ideology cannot determine whether classrooms will be rich in narrative; as we have seen, neither the progressive era nor the subsequent 'performative era' (Parker 2015) have demonstrably encouraged storytelling. It is notable that, while the aspects of storyknowing most emphasized by theorists largely accorded with the constructivist philosophy of the progressive era, those emphasized by the pupils – the particular constellation of storyteller-teacher and absorbed listeners slowly building up a class vernacular and repertoire of stories – often did not. (The period preceding both, in which narrative did often flourish, may have been characterized largely by authoritarian educational approaches, but the non-interference of the state in schools makes it difficult to call this an ideology.)

It does, however, seem that the current climate of closely specified and frequently assessed educational outcomes is incompatible with both the informal narrative voice, and the scope for teachers to act as storytellers. Removing these constraints might create a more hospitable environment for the former, but would not guarantee the latter, after several generations in which teachers have become estranged from the role of storyteller and, as Douglas Barnes laments, anecdotal knowledge has become increasingly 'unthinkable' as a contribution to classroom discussion (Howe and Johnson 1992).

*The reintroduction of endangered narrative?*

Both Goodson et al (2010) and Bruner (1996) underline that narrative sensibility is not an 'innate' or 'natural' ability of humans but something that must be developed. For Bruner, this development is an essential task of education: 'Schools must cultivate it, nurture it, cease taking it for granted' (1996: 42).

Our research suggests that for this to occur, the paradox between compliance (or performativity) and creativity in the English education system must be tackled head on. That is, there must be a recognition that creativity and deep learning necessarily involve unfathomable processes within pupils' minds (Joe: *it's only because some of us do it to, like, picture the images in our heads*), which may not yield rapid or measurable results. While 'active' listening and planned creative learning strategies undoubtedly have a role, they may often interrupt imaginative engagement in a topic, and must be complemented by opportunities to exercise the invisible creativity of the absorbed, apparently passive, listener. The value of life experience (both first- and second-hand) as a source of knowledge must also be re-asserted, even at the risk of 'wasting time' on unpredictable narrative exchanges between pupils and teachers.

There are routes through which narrative might regain a stronger presence in UK classrooms. An enlightened approach to citizenship and values education might incorporate storytelling as a means for children to form their own discourses or directives (Doddington and Hilton 2007). Ongoing drives to develop young people's higher level thinking skills, and abilities to write extended creative pieces, might also harness the properties of narrative. There is a clear need for larger-scale research into the potential of narrative-based approaches in the current system, particularly at secondary level.

However, as Goodson et al (2010) warn, storytelling skills should not be excessively instrumentalized as another requirement to be fulfilled within a crowded curriculum. Stories, as YYY's pupils remind us, move slowly. They need time and space to take shape in pupils' minds, and like an endangered

‘indicator’ species, they cannot thrive in just any habitat. Rather learning needs to be shaped around their needs; in YYY’s words,

*I give pupils time to listen, to think, to formulate a response. So I would say that yes, storytelling is a metaphor for the way I run my classroom.*

That is the greatest challenge stories pose to education, and it is the reason they are vital.

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