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Heinemeyer, Catherine (2019) The whole story, the whole student: ‘big’ stories as a playground for dialogic learning. The Use of English, Spring.

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<u>The whole story, the whole student: 'big' stories as a playground for dialogic learning</u>

The (hopeless?) case for everyday storytelling in schools

I have spent much of the past few years trying to work out whether storytelling has become an endangered species in schools, whether it's on the Red List or simply vulnerable, and what kinds of learning are at risk from its decline (see for example Heinemeyer and Durham 2017; Heinemeyer 2018). Through hundreds of hours of practice research as a storyteller within secondary classrooms and other educational settings, I (and my teacher-collaborators) have seen students become deeply immersed in story-worlds of other places and times, and come back from them with imaginative riches of their own. We are struck over and over again by the contrast between, for example, their eloquent responses to the experience of a particular escaped slave, and their much more limited ability to articulate their general views on slavery. Their drama, poetry and artwork in response to stories repeatedly underscore Michael Oakeshott's passionate reminder that '*"teaching by example"*, which is sometimes dismissed as an inferior sort of teaching […] is emancipating the pupil from the half utterances of rules by making him aware of a concrete situation' (1989, cited in Kazepides 2012). It is not in naming 'issues', but in exploration of the intricacies of concrete situations – for that is what stories are – that students learn how to live.

I am the first to admit that it's easy to be bewitched by these experiences of *communitas* and shared creativity, into losing sight of the other half of the educational picture: students also need to develop analytical language skills, to master the grammar and usages of their language so they can claim their own platforms to speak to the world.

However, what is undeniably true is that the telling of a whole story – or even the experience of being immersed in a whole novel – has become an awkward fit within the UK English curriculum. It is rarely the quickest or most certain path to fulfilling closely specified learning objectives, and even less to demonstrating they have been achieved. This is, however, only part of the picture; stories have become an unintended casualty of some much-needed developments in education. Emphases on active listening and learning have led to a suspicion of any activity that leaves a class in apparently 'passive' receptive mode for anything like the fifteen minutes it might take to narrate a meaty story. Meanwhile, recent rediscoveries of 'creativity' and oracy have refocused teachers on developing students' problem-solving abilities and ability to articulate a point, but have a 'blind spot' where narrative and story are concerned. Oracy textbooks such as Holderness and Lalljee (1998) and Jones and Hodson (2012) hive storytelling off into a single 'special interest' chapter, while guides to creativity in learning such as Fautley and Savage (2007) give narrative no mention at all.

A further factor in story's endangered status is teachers' own reticence to adopt the role of storyteller. To tell a story, whether a personal anecdote or a long fictional narrative, demands confidence in performance – albeit an informal kind of performance – as well as in speaking from one's own knowledge, wisdom and experience. This is difficult for a generation of teachers trained in a period of compliance with a centrally defined curriculum, who have become used to acting as 'the deliverers of other people's messages' (Lowe 1998: 98).

And yet, as Betty Rosen's guides for teachers who would be storytellers (1988, 1993) reminds us, most teachers, especially English teachers, are potential storytellers. These two books, which were much-loved and very influential following their publication, reflect a time not so long ago when

there was less anxiety to pre-specify the outcomes of learning. Rosen speaks from her own storytelling experiences with her inner-city secondary pupils, at first tentative experiments, later infusing traditional, fictional and factual oral storytelling throughout her teaching. They provide ample evidence that listening to an oral telling can scarcely be surpassed as a rich language experience, and that every retelling by a student is in fact a creative piece of writing. As she points out, individual young people can bring aspects of their own life experience and cultural inheritance to the task of making a story their own; retelling a story thus becomes a means of learning from life, stitching one's own life experience into the fabric of human knowledge.

This last observation also hints at what may be the strongest argument for including whole stories in teaching today. We are living in a time when young people's mental health appears to be at an unprecedented low point, when their futures look economically and ecologically precarious, and political institutions on every level are too polarised and fragmented to command their faith. More than ever before, young people need space to make sense of themselves and the world around them in dialogue with caring adults. Providing this is the least we can do, and it's perhaps all we can do. Yet, as Kazepides (2012) reminds us, the ability to engage in dialogue is not an innate attribute but something that must be nourished by abundant examples and everyday practice. Moreover, we need to do this in ways that are not 'therapy', not intrusive nor prescriptive, but exploratory and open-ended. The literary or mythic stories we read and tell with students provide meaty fictional frames into which they can introduce themes of importance to them, and we can stand ready to facilitate exploration of these themes.

Stories, to paraphrase Claude Levi-Strauss (1964), are 'good to think with'. To illustrate exactly why, I'd like to tell the story of a brief project, *Journeys We Make*, at two Yorkshire secondary schools, initiated by myself (a storyteller and theatre researcher at York St John University) and Dr Michalis Kakos, a teacher educator at Leeds Beckett University.

Journeys We Make

The project originated in the aspiration to facilitate dialogue about students' experiences of migration, in two ethnically diverse secondary schools. Teachers rightly wish to understand and meet the needs of recently arrived pupils from refugee and EAL backgrounds, and to allow these pupils to tell their stories to others. Yet this intention can come into conflict with those students' desire to move past the stigmatised identity of 'refugee' or 'new arrival'. After all, other journeys may be of greater significance to a young person than their geographical migrations - their journey towards adulthood, for example.

We decided to choose a mythic framework which could accommodate many interpretations of the word 'journey', and draw pupils of diverse backgrounds into a creative exploration of it through poetry and animation. Following initial discussions with teachers and the artists with whom we aimed to work, we chose Homer's *Odyssey*, a huge and complex canvas which abounds in 'generative themes' (Arizpe et al 2014) of personal development and migration, without neatly resolving any of them. It is also, vitally, already the common property of many cultures, thus part of the patrimony of every student involved in the project.

Both schools agreed to open up the project to pupils from any year group, and provide a whole day for the mixed-age group to work together with us. Each workshop day started with my retelling of part of the *Odyssey* (each school worked with a different section of it), physicalized to help those who were EAL learners. We then used drama techniques to allow pupils to home in on those characters, moments and themes that intrigued them, and facilitated various poetry writing exercises to explore these. Pupils then produced further 'retellings' of these moments and themes through stop-motion animation using handmade paper puppets – creating an arresting combination of striking visual and verbal images.

We subsequently met pupils to plan a sharing event at a local arts centre. On the day of the sharing, pupils entered the studio somewhat shyly, but were soon gathered in a single circle. The only thing they were sure of having in common was their shared experience of the *Odyssey*, and this proved to be a solid enough meeting ground: while all the adults in the room were busy with AV equipment, they initiated their own warm-up game of 'Greek whispers'.

The energy the pupils chose to put into preparing their sharings - rehearsing, preparing displays, meeting over lunchtime, and overcoming their anxiety to travel across town to meet strangers from another district - was testament to their feeling that the project had been 'worth it'. This project, though short and disconnected from the rest of school life, seemed to have an intrinsic value for them. Yet after the videos and poetry had been shared, one girl asked: 'I have a question. Why did you come and tell us this story?'

The question was understandable. The pupils could see we had put what appeared to be a disproportionate amount of time into something with no apparent link to their curriculum. We found ourselves in an extended conversation between pupils, teachers and visiting artists to articulate what, collectively, we thought our exploration of the *Odyssey* had been about. My own thoughts on this question, some months later, are best articulated through some vignettes from the process.

Why start with a story?

It 'raises the floor'…

To research a historical topic or read a long novel takes many days. Each of my starting tellings of parts of the *Odyssey* had only taken half an hour. It had introduced the students to ten or more characters and numerous decisions and points of tension: a desperate stranger begging for transport across the ocean, a queen who had to make an instinctive judgement whether or not to host Odysseus, another queen in another land torn between faithfulness and pragmatism, a servant who went behind her mistress' back to facilitate her son's dangerous journey, an elderly swineherd whose true origins as a trafficked child had remained hidden all his life, a young man who needed to throw off his childhood to protect his home….

That is, a story is a very rapid way to set up a complex framework for debate and exploration, taking listeners directly to the heart of real, challenging situations. The ratio of reward to effort, in other words, is very high. The story can 'raise the floor', bringing the whole group up to a higher level of understanding and dialogue than would otherwise be possible – particularly for young people, with

their limited life experience. Over-simplifications and sweeping statements become impossible as students grapple with the circumstances of particular characters – as was evident in students' poetry in particular. They were in effect 'cleverer within the story'.

In the case of EAL students, the access the physicalized storytelling gave them to the storyworld was of especial importance. One girl in our discussion raised her hand to say, "My English is not very good. But with the story, it made us remember it and be able to tell it." There was vigorous nodding around her.

It allows students' own cultural languages to enrich classroom language….

When we remarked on the lyrical tone of some of the students' contributions in the drama and poetry activities – 'My watchful eye never rests / I am time and space itself' – one student said that the story reminded her of some of the Koranic passages she had learnt. Others agreed and demonstrated the reciting style in which they had been taught these verses.

Students may find that the often 'timeless' language register of oral storytelling gives them 'permission' to use such inherited language styles and codes. A student recently arrived from Ghana seemed to invoke the stately language of African folktale in her poem about Princess Nausicaa, which she read out in declamatory style:

> My name is Princess Sunshine.
>
> I am as precious as a diamond to my parents and my people
>
> Because I am their king's only child.
>
> I am proud to be their daughter.
>
> My heart was beating as fast as a sprinter as I approached this stranger
>
> Who was hiding himself behind a bush.

It allows students to learn from their life experience and that of others…

The decisive step for each student in making their own mark on the story was the act of choosing a moment or character to explore. Invariably, this was a moment about which they felt themselves to have insider knowledge, or questions that needed to be answered.

The outstanding performer in the drama exercises following the oral telling in one school was a student who had, staff informed us, arrived as an unaccompanied minor to the UK less than 12 months previously. His English was still limited. Nonetheless he had a firm grip on every turn of the story of Odysseus' arrival in Ithaca, and recalled key details to his classmates' memories, urging them to make frozen images of what struck him as the vital points in the story. In particular, he worked with two friends to show the moment when Odysseus leaves the hospitable king of the Phaecians and arrives on the unrecognised shore, lost and alone, and a shepherd (the goddess Athene in disguise) advises him where to go for refuge and advice. He told the class, in explanation, that the goddess had become a shepherd because 'Shepherds are good people,' and went on to talk about his own experience as a shepherd back home.

Another student was interested in the often-ignored character of Eurycleia, Odysseus' and Telemachus' old nurse, who facilitates Telemachus' own mini-odyssey by gathering supplies in secret, and managing his mother Penelope's grief at his departure. The student said Eurycleia reminded her of her mother, who served everyone else before thinking about herself, and was never recognised for it. Her succinct poem restored Eurycleia to her proper place:

> Like a mother she was,
>
> Helping and giving, but never receiving,
>
> Loving and caring, but never cared for.
>
> Baking and cooking, but eating last.
>
> She raised strong men and she brought up strong women.
>
> Eurycleia was her name,
>
> Let us not forget it.

It can act as a jumping-off point to test ideologies and discourses that surround them…

Betty Rosen (1988) points out that while every retelling involved some creative interpretation by students, there are invariably some individuals who have a strong response to a particular aspect or theme in a story, and choose to use it for their own purposes – often, to explore or challenge a cultural ideology. Such retellings move well beyond the story's original territory.

This can be seen in two treatments of Queen Helen of Troy by two different students in the same school – a school which seeks to give girls a space to articulate their own identities as young women of mostly Muslim backgrounds. This extract from the first seemed to allude to the ongoing tendency to judge and criticise women in positions of power:

> Why should I care about opinions
>
> Of those decades younger than me,
>
> Those who think of me
>
> As a fictional character in a book,
>
> As an underappreciated, objectified and tainted woman.
>
> But I am real.
>
> Women like me are alive today.

The second seemed to assert Helen's right to be a complex and morally ambiguous character, a mature woman and a beauty:

> I am Autumn,
>
> Sweet and bitter,

From green to brown,

Changing like Proteus,

The old man of the sea,

A great destroyer of mankind.

I am Autumn.

It was equally evident in another student's poem about the stranger who begs for passage on Telemachus' ship – a stranger about whom we know very little. The student filled in the details to make a strong point, as in this extract:

I am alone, hungry and tired.

No-one wants to help a black person,

Even for money.

I'm dirty, they said. Dirty like a pig.

If only they knew that I was a prince,

Soon to be king.

I am so close to my freedom.

Telemachus. My way out.

And soon….the roles will reverse.

I will be the lion

And they will be my prey.

It leads naturally to exploration of the possibilities of different artforms and media…

The drama, poetry and animation activities drew out different kinds of responses from the young people. If I were to attempt to sum up the distinctions, I would observe that **drama** was a vital gateway, allowing students to take the big and meaty story they had just heard into their own bodies before creating something original in response. Students tackled the **poetic** task as a means to mythologise or dignify their own experience, or those of characters with whom they identified. The **animation**, in contrast, seemed to make an invitation to contemporise and even satirise the story – translating it into social contexts they recognised. At one school, the behaviour of the suitors who invade Odysseus' house and disrespected his family seemed to map onto the behaviour of gangs. One group of students scripted and recorded a dialogue about the ways gangs lure people in, the difficulties of being accepted, and the pressure to change yourself to meet others' expectations. Their animation featured the exchange of Nike trainers for prestige outside a school building. Moreover, the 'craft' nature of animation required students to spend considerable time creating just

one short sequence of images – forcing them to make editorial choices, stripping the complexities of the story down to what they perceived as its essentials.

Working in multiple artforms may be a luxury which teachers can rarely provide within the constraints of budget and curriculum, but the experience of *Journeys We Make* reiterates the importance of offering pupils multiple creative accesses to a narrative or text.

Conclusion

Storytelling projects are too often 'special' events like the one I have described, involving visiting artists and considerable investment. This cannot substitute for empowering teachers themselves to act as storytellers when they see fit, and giving them the space to cultivate this art among their pupils.

It's fitting to finish with the words of Harold Rosen (cited in O'Connor 2010: 41), Betty's husband, another crusader for story in schools:

> Narrative must become a more acceptable way of saying, writing, thinking and presenting. I am not proposing that anecdote should drive out analysis but that narrative should be allowed its honourable place in the analysis of everything, that stories-in-the-head should be given their chance to be heard.

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