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Sharing Stories: An Interactive, Interdisciplinary Approach

Tracy Hayes

Abstract

‘Tracy, come over here, read this...’, one of the students calls me over, continuing ‘It’s so sad’. Her gaze holds mine as she speaks, gauging my reaction. When she sees she has my attention, she points to a display cabinet in front of us. I look down and see medals, laid out with an explanatory note from the author, a famous book illustrator. I read the words, ‘In memory of my uncles, who died in the Great War.’ I look up at the student as she whispers to me, ‘They were so young, they were our age.’ Her voice tails off into a shared silent space that words cannot fill, yet is over-spilling with emotion... (to be continued). This article brings together reflections from both professional and personal perspectives, to address the interdisciplinary potential of storytelling, both as an approach to teaching and research, and as a means for communication. I do all that and more, by focusing on the particularities within an experience that was professional, personal and emotional. I share this with you in story form and, in the method advocated by Hustedde and King,¹ invite you to slow down your mind and let my words sink beneath your skin, so that you reflect on the meanings of your own experiences. The ellipsis points are placed purposefully at the end of five sentences within the story to signify transition points at which to pause and focus the conversation. This is an evocative methodological approach I have adopted for my most treasured encounters, which I refer to as ‘magic moments’. I interpret these through creative non-fiction, taking great care to critically analyse each moment, to extract meaning and avoid it being merely ‘a nice story’. It is so much more than that.

Key Words: Story, Storytelling, Interdisciplinary, Interactive, Evocative, Emotion, Creative Non-Fiction, Pedagogy, Research.

Introduction

This article explores experiences from a small-scale project, contextualized within, and complementary to, a larger-scale doctoral research project. My research² makes use of a blended methodology of hermeneutics, autoethnography and action research, and I view my research as emergent, open-ended, innovative and creative. I embrace methods that invite introspection, reflexivity and dialogue.³ I have found this an effective way to explore and understand situations whilst remaining mindful of the influence of my values, beliefs and emotions. This article is written in a similar style to other publications (articles, book chapters and conference presentations) that form part of my doctoral research,⁴ which share the

aim of encouraging a critical conversation about the research and pedagogical approaches we use.

I conducted an action research study with the explicit purpose of piloting stories as a pedagogical tool. This was in response to students' feedback which we had gathered through both informal methods (conversations and flip-chart evaluations) and more formal methods (end of module evaluation forms). Initial analysis suggested that students felt there was a tendency towards over-reliance on lectures involving Power Point Presentations, whilst they would prefer more interactive, discursive activities. I used these preliminary findings to define my research question: 'Are stories effective as an interactive pedagogical tool in HE?' The next phase of the research was a seminar session led by a colleague who guided seventeen students through a short creative writing activity. I joined as a participant observer, sharing the experience of writing with the students, then switched to co-tutor to read a short story (interpreting findings from my doctoral research), written to exemplify contemporary issues in childhood. I asked students for feedback, using semi-structured questions as prompts; their responses, with my observations, were recorded in a field notebook. The following week, together with a third colleague, fifteen of the seventeen students and I went on a trip to the UK's national centre for children's books.⁵ We had planned to follow this with more discussions, however due to external factors, the final two weeks of term were cancelled and students returned home early. As an alternative, students were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey.

A moment from the trip is creatively interpreted to form the central point from which the discussion radiates. This is an evocative methodological approach I have adopted for my most treasured research encounters, I call them 'magic moments', which I interpret through creative non-fiction. As advocated by Denzin,⁶ each moment is critically analysed to extract meaning and avoid it being merely a nice story; it is so much more than that. The language is consciously provocative and evocative: it is '...scholarship [that] reaches toward an audience, it cares. It wants to make a difference...'⁷ whereby the reader is invited to imagine themselves alongside us, within the story, sharing the experience.⁸

'Come over here, read this...'

One of the students calls me over, continuing '*It's so sad*'. Her gaze holds mine as she speaks, gauging my reaction. When she sees she has my attention, she points to a display cabinet in front of us. I look down and see medals, laid out with an explanatory note from the author, a famous book illustrator. I read the words, 'In memory of my uncles, who died in the Great War.' I look up at the student as she whispers to me, '*They were so young, they*

were our age.' Her voice tails off into a shared silent space that words cannot fill, yet is over-spilling with emotion...

'Wow! Look at this over here – we can dress up as different animals.' *'Ha! Look at me, I'm a goose.'* *'Yeah, well I'm a fox, so better watch out you goose!'* Roused from our thoughts, we turn to see some of the other students have found the dressing-up area and are having fun, playing and teasing each other. Our shared moment expands to include them, and becomes more light-hearted and playful. They begin taking 'selfies', posting them to the internet to share with others. *'Ok, we need to move on now, we're running out of time...'*

The words of the facilitator signify that playtime is over and that the workshop is due to start. We have booked a session on the importance of reading in early years' work. We all appear somewhat surprised that the emphasis here is not on phonics, and the technicalities of learning to read. Nor is it on the process of reading, and our role as practitioners within this. No, the focus is on reading for pleasure, for enjoyment, and we are introduced to the world of picture books for grown-ups. The facilitator asks us to suggest reasons for why it is so important to include beautifully drawn pictures in books, and we respond as a group with a wide range of academic and theoretical reasons. She nods, and agrees with them, then says, *'For some children, and their families, this is the only way they can access art...'*

The room falls silent...

It is a silence of continuing contemplation...⁹

The ellipses at the end of six sentences within the story indicate places at which to pause and focus the conversation through asking specific questions. These are addressed through reference to literature and research data, interweaved and used to support and explore my findings. This is unapologetically interpretive and subjective. To ensure research integrity, prior to dissemination, the story was first shared with the young woman concerned, to secure her permission and approval of my interpretation of events; then it was reviewed by colleagues.

Come over here, read this...

The student's words extend to me an invitation to share in her experience; this is in sharp contrast to our more usual interactions, whereby I as the lecturer, invite her to join in with the experiences I have chosen. This is the planned world of learning outcomes as specified within the module descriptor; these form part of the third year curriculum, which in its turn, forms part of the validated degree programme, as approved by the external examiner and the university board. There

is little room for spontaneity or ‘unplanned’ learning: whilst the Higher Education Academy (HEA) emphasises the need ‘... for ‘rounded’ graduates, with subject knowledge and a range of essential attributes for work and life in a complex, rapidly changing world...’,¹⁰ they further extort that this ‘...entails strategic and creative rethinking of *traditional approaches* to curriculum design to embed a clear focus on *learning outcomes* that develop these attributes’ (my emphasis added). Despite the HEA having a clearly identified work-stream focused on innovative pedagogies,¹¹ their dominant focus within this appears to be on the use of digital technologies. In contrast, the findings from my project suggest that the inclusion of *non-digital* technologies (again, my emphasis) can be vitally important. Sharing stories, in both oral and written form, has been part of the human learning experience for centuries, providing a recognisable way of constructing meaning.¹² Through story, we learn to recognise and become familiar with things and people, learning to interpret and understand the world. Within this particular undergraduate programme, there has been some use of story before, however this has not been effectively recorded or evaluated. Many of the students profess to dislike reading – in any form, fiction or non-fiction – and this is noticeable within their struggles to cope with academic reading and referencing. This awareness reinforces the need to find more appropriate and effective pedagogical approaches.

In Higher Education (HE) settings, there is some freedom to alter the curriculum as it is delivered, as long as it meets agreed learning criteria and fits within monitoring and quality assurance processes. One of the main features of a curriculum is that learning and assessment is planned and guided, primarily by the teacher/tutor/facilitator of the learning experience; it is informed by knowledge of the learners likely to be involved. This process is called curriculum alignment, and is an inherently problematic concept as Parker highlights: ‘Alignment’ contrasts with the ‘webs’ of data, science, social contact and interactivity with which we work and in which we sometimes feel trapped’.¹³ The aligning process can inhibit our ability to follow student-led curiosity and interest – to join with them and read what they find intriguing. For more than fifty years Bloom’s Taxonomy,¹⁴ with various revisions, has provided the foundation for much teacher training; however, it is highly contestable as to whether it can effectively meet current learning needs which include creativity, imagination, critical thinking skills as well as ... ‘flexibility as an attribute or capability, in both learners and educators’.¹⁵

A shared silent space that words cannot fill, yet is over-spilling with emotion...

In contrast to traditional learning environments of lecture theatres and seminar rooms, the open, neutral space of the centre allows a shifting of the inherent power differential in the teaching relationship: this is a space we are exploring together in a relatively unplanned way. Most of us have not been here before, do not know what to expect, and there are no prescribed outcomes to meet. The ‘felt’ presence

of a third person, the author/illustrator whose exhibition we are viewing, ensures this becomes a multi-faceted experience as we read, interpret and reflect on his words. This is an emotional experience, silently acknowledged, but how can this be evidenced or assessed? One of the main criticisms of Bloom's Taxonomy is that it places emphasis on factors that can be measured, and as a result the affective domain is often overlooked in favour of the cognitive and psychomotor domains. Yet there is considerable research, for example Pierre and Oughton,¹⁶ which suggests the affective domain represents the 'gateway to learning'; I agree with their approach, and aim to teach from the affective domain, so that learning influences attitudes, as observed in actions and behaviours, values and beliefs. For me, learning is emotional, social and part of a *holistic* experience,¹⁷ and I firmly believe that reflexivity is key to this – both teacher and student individually, and whenever possible, as a shared process.

It has long been recognised that learning is a social and cultural experience,¹⁸ but what does this mean in practice for a lecturer and/or researcher? I have no desire to hide behind a curtain of academic objectivity. I include myself in the process '... on behalf of others, a body that invites identification and empathic connection, a body that takes as its charge to be fully human'.¹⁹ I further agree with his methodological approach that there is so much more to research with people than assumed authority, critical argument and establishing the correct criteria. In my teaching, whilst remaining clear about my professional boundaries, I also talk about my personal experiences when they relate to the theme of a session, so that learning is informed and brought to life. I actively encourage students to offer their perspectives and reflect on their own experiences. However, I also remind them to 'share with care' so that they do not over-share, or make themselves/their peers, uncomfortable or stray too far from the topic. This interactive, shared approach should not be rushed, it needs to be considerate and supportive.

There are many ways of sharing our experiences, including technological, as in the 'selfies' which were shared across a range of internet-based platforms. As academics it is important to keep up to date with modern technologies, and where appropriate to embrace them within teaching and research. However, what is the potential impact of this shift in focus away from the *immediacy* of the experience, as shared by those present, to one for an uninvolved, absent 'audience'? Unfortunately, there is insufficient time and space to explore that here, however it suggests an area for future research.

Ok, we need to move on now, we're running out of time...

There is an all pervading feeling of running out of time, juggling too many, often competing tasks. Sarah Marten asserts that this is a challenge experienced by academics at all levels,²⁰ attempting to negotiate their way through the rapidly

changing world of HE.²¹ This can be even more problematic when working with non-traditional students, enrolled through widening participation agenda, many of whom require additional support to adjust to the demands of tertiary education. Working within a policy of widening participation brings many challenges, emphasising the need to understand and address hierarchical relations, inequalities and power differentials that underpin diversity.²² This is further compounded by large group sizes, making it difficult to address the wide range of individual needs. Within all this it can be difficult to find time and space for playfulness, creativity, art, for story.

The only way they can access art...

The facilitator's comment was a stark reminder that not everyone has equal access to art in all its wondrous forms: visual, written and oral. Research, for example by OECD shows that students who engage in a wide range of reading activities are '...more likely than other students to be effective learners and to perform well... Proficiency in reading is crucial for individuals to make sense of the world they live in...'.²³ I do not believe that we do this well enough in HE where the emphasis is more on reading with a purpose, to inform and underpin arguments, applied to substantiate opinions, within a focus on career employment. And yet, creativity has been identified by CBI as a graduate employability skill and a prime outcome of higher education,²⁴ justifying the application of more creative, artistic and poetic methods. When I use the terms 'creative' or 'creativity', like Rothman, I am referring to the philosophical '...watchful, inner kind of creativity [is] not about making things but about experiencing life in a creative way; it's a way of asserting your own presence amidst the much larger world of nature, and of finding significance in that wider world'.²⁵

The specific questions from my questionnaire help to move this article towards a close as I return to re-address the research question: 'Are stories effective as an interactive pedagogical tool in HE?' I will address each question from the questionnaire in turn, and offer an answer based on my interpretation. Students' responses confirmed my observations that whilst the majority welcomed the opportunity to write their own stories, some found it challenging, not perceiving themselves as creative; they would have benefited from additional support and time. How can thinking and expressing ourselves in this way be different from other forms of communication? There were a range of responses, including using your imagination; ownership of words; freedom of expression and 'There can be a little bit of magic...the brain works in a different way.' Their responses to the question, 'What can be challenging about writing creatively?' indicated the need for a sensitive, considered and supportive approach that allowed for a mix of short-timed pieces and longer, thoughtful pieces. What can be enjoyable about writing

creatively? Their responses as before highlighted imagination, creativity and escapism - as well as the perception that this can be good for mental health.

The findings were inconclusive as to which of the activities they preferred: this would have been more effectively explored through discussion than via a questionnaire. However, the students were unanimously positive about the use of fictional stories as an effective way to explore contemporary issues, exemplified by the comments 'Yes as it can capture the audience' and '...stories are part of our lives.' With regard to going on a trip as part of introducing this interactive approach, they were also very positive and reported that they would have liked longer at the centre, to explore, play and read: they felt rushed.

In answer to the question 'Are stories effective as an interactive pedagogical tool in HE?' these findings emphatically respond yes, they are, indicating there is a genuine need to be more creative, interactive - and playful - to consider the way we convey our messages so that we encourage participation and critical thinking. However, with large group sizes, and students with diverse support needs, this approach needs sensitivity, careful planning - and arguably the most precious resource of all, time. Within this small-scale project, my interdisciplinary approach enabled me to take an overview of the topic, address it from differing perspectives, to be intuitive and responsive. This is a contextual and specific approach and it is wise to remember the caution from Rees and Porter that: '... what can be appropriate in one situation may be quite inappropriate in another'.²⁶ The same can be said of stories: when using them it is important to be clear about the purpose. I reflect on the words of Pullman who said that '...the act of true reading is in its very essence democratic... it's like a conversation. There's a back-and-forthness about it'.²⁷ This has been confirmed by my findings, and I would further argue that it is a conversation that has the added benefit of sparking further conversations: an active and dynamic process, the importance and effectiveness of which should not be overlooked in the rush towards more 'modern' technological approaches.

To end, like the room in the story, I now fall silent, a silence of continuing contemplation as I am left with many unanswered questions, and I suspect, with many questions as yet not fully-formed. It is my sincere hope that these will continue to be trouble and unsettle me,²⁸ as I move through the final stages of my doctoral research. It will ensure that my research remains grounded in, and informed by practice to bring about effective, and meaningful change, which is the essence of action research.

Notes

¹ Ronal Hustedde and Betty King, 'Rituals: Emotions, Community Faith in Soul and the Messiness of Life.' *Community Development Journal* 37, (2002): 338-348, 342

² My PhD research is titled: 'Making Sense of Nature: A Creative Exploration of Young People's Relationship with the Natural Environment.'

³ For examples, please see:

Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004).

Rahul Mitra, 'Doing Ethnography. Being an Ethnographer. The Autoethnographic Research Process and I'. *Journal of Research Practice*. (2010): 1-21, 6.

Laurel Richardson, 'Writing—A Method of Inquiry', *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2000), 923-948.

⁴ For an example, please see Tracy Hayes, 'Playful Approaches to Outdoor Learning: Boggarts, Bears and Bunny Rabbits!' 2015. *Play, Recreation, Health and Wellbeing* ed. John Horton and Bethan Evans, vol 9: *Geographies of Children and Young People* ed. Tracey Skelton (Springer, Singapore, 2015), 1-19.

⁵ Seven Stories is the National home of Children's Books, UK, for more information, URL: <http://www.sevenstories.org.uk/>

⁶ Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014)

⁷ Ronald Pelias, *A Methodology of the Heart: Evoking Academic and Daily Life*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004), 12.

⁸ Hustedde and King, 'Rituals', 342.

⁹ Story written by the author, specifically for this article to illustrate research findings.

¹⁰ HEA, *Curriculum Design*, (2015): non paginated. Viewed: 27 July 2016 URL: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/workstreams/curriculum-design>

¹¹ HEA, *Innovative Pedagogies*, (2015): non paginated. Viewed: 04 July 2016 URL: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/workstreams/innovative-pedagogies>

¹² Sotirios Sarantakos, *Social Research*, 3rd Edition. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

¹³ Jan Parker, 'Imaging, Imagining Knowledge in Higher Education Curricula: New Visions and Troubled Thresholds'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18.8 (2013): 958–970, 3

¹⁴ Benjamin Samuel Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*. (New York: Longman, 1956)

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- ¹⁵ Alex Ryan and Daniella Tilbury, *Flexible Pedagogies: New Pedagogical Ideas*. (York: The Higher Education Academy, 2013), 4.
- ¹⁶ Eleanor Pierre and John Oughton, 'The Affective Domain: Undiscovered Country', *College Quarterly*, 10.4. (2007):1-7
- ¹⁷ Also discussed in Peter Jarvis, 'Towards a Philosophy of Human Learning: an Existentialist Perspective'. *Human Learning: An Holistic Approach*, eds. Peter Jarvis and Stella Parker (Oxon: Routledge, 2005): 1-15.
- Clifford Mayes, 'Ten Pillars of a Jungian Approach to Education' *Encounter* 18.2. (2005): 30-41.
- Wilbert McKeachie. 'Psychology in America's Bicentennial Year'. *American Psychologist*, 31, (1976): 819-833
- ¹⁸ Robert Rieber, ed. *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky, Vol. 4: The History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions* (New York: Plenum Press, 1997)
- ¹⁹ Ronald J. Pelias, *Methodology of the Heart*, 1
- ²⁰ Sarah Marten, *The Challenges Facing Academic Staff in UK Universities*. (2009): non paginated. Viewed 27 July 2016. URL: <http://www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/working-in-higher-education/1350/the-challenges-facing-academic-staff-in-uk-universities>
- ²¹ Paul Temple, et al., *Managing the Student Experience in a Shifting Higher Education Landscape*. (York: The Higher Education Academy, 2014)
- ²² For examples, please see Penny Burke, *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond Widening Participation*. (London: Routledge, 2012).
- David Gosling, *Micro-Power Relations between Teachers and Students using Five Perspectives on Teaching in Higher Education*, (2007) Viewed 13 March 2015. URL: <http://bit.ly/11jcS3T>.
- Neil Thompson, *Promoting Equality: Working with Diversity and Difference*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- ²³ OECD, *Do Students Read for Pleasure?* (2011): non paginated. Viewed 04 July 2016 URL:<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisainfocus/48624701.pdf>
- ²⁴ CBI, *Learning to Grow: What Employers Need from Education and Skills*. (London: CBI, 2012)
- ²⁵ Joshua Rothman, *Creativity Creep*. (2014): non paginated. Viewed 17 August 2015. URL: <http://www.newyorker.com/books/joshua-rothman/creativity-creep>.
- ²⁶ David Rees and Christine Porter. *Skills of Management and Leadership: Managing People in Organizations*. (London: Palgrave, 2015), xv
- ²⁷ Philp Pullman, *The War on Words*. (Guardian Review, 6.11.04) Viewed 27 July 2016. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/nov/06/usa.politics>
- ²⁸ Jan HF Meyer and Ray Land, *Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practising within the Disciplines*. (Edinburgh: ETL Project, 2003)

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