

The Teacher as Storyteller

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Abstract

Do you wish to connect with your students? Then cultivate the art of storytelling. A good story can enliven a dull lesson, and it can expand the horizons of an interesting one. Storytelling can be used as an advance organizer for introducing a new unit of thought, or it can work equally well as a capstone for what has already been learned. Great teachers have shown themselves to be lively storytellers. How can storytelling enhance both teaching and learning?

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It is hard to get your students to level with you about your teaching. Most stand in fear of receiving a poor grade. Once in a while a brave soul or two may wander into your office for a friendly chat. When this happens, maybe, just maybe, they will tell you the truth about your teaching. During my 45 years of classroom experience, I had such an experience a number of times. What were the truths my former students were willing to share? Almost to a person they told me they had long since forgotten all of the big ideas I had labored so painstakingly to present. What they still remembered were all of the stories I had casually woven into the lessons. How can storytelling be used to enhance teaching and learning?

Teaching is a highly personalized activity. We always teach who we are. How could it be otherwise? Teaching and learning revolve around the stories we tell about ourselves and others. The teacher, like the drama coach, creates a colorful performance out of human experience. In teaching, as in the theater, there is no substitute for a live performance. A classroom without a teacher is a like a stage without an actor. The human touch is what brings the script to life. Stories do not unfold in a vacuum. The heart joins the head in any meaningful performance. Teachers, if they are skillful storytellers, combine thought and feeling into an aesthetic whole.

Storytelling and Culture

Storytelling is a universal aspect of human culture. It is one of the principal ways in which basic ideas and values are transmitted from one generation to the next. Through the art of storytelling, a sense of group identity is created and recreated in the hearts and minds of the human community. The rituals and ceremonies of all human societies reflect the stories people tell about themselves. These stories, in turn, find their way into formal and informal modes of education. Ancient Jewish education, for example, engaged young men in memorizing and reciting the Torah, which contained all the stories told in the first five books of the Old

Testament. Athenian education, on the other hand, busied its male students in memorizing and reciting the poems of Homer, which included the stories of the fall of Troy and the adventures of Ulysses. Christian education, not to be outdone, incorporated into itself both the stories from the Old as well as the New Testament. The story of Jesus, as recorded in the four gospels, became the central focus of Christian education.

Storytelling did not die with the ancients. It is alive and well—expressing itself wholeheartedly in today’s world. The modern world, however, has turned away from religious themes, and it has moved progressively toward a secularization of knowledge. Similarly, storytelling has followed suit. Knowledge has become increasingly organized around academic disciplines such as history, science, and literature. Each discipline, in turn, has served as a depository for the stories about its principal contributors and their respective ideas. Every school child in the United States has heard the story about the American experience—how peoples from many different lands came together and participated in building a democratic nation that is envied around the world. The faces of the folk heroes of the nation are carved in stone on Mount Rushmore. Science has developed its own distinctive story line—how humanity has tried to uncover and make intelligible nature’s secrets. Einstein’s equation, $E = mc^2$, disclosed the power residing in a single atom; Watson and Crick unlocked the double-helix pattern of DNA; and teams of researchers are currently engaged in mapping the mysteries of the human brain. Finally, literature is the *sine qua non* of storytelling. Great literature is the art of finding the universal within the particular—how archetypes manifest themselves in individual lives. The drama of human experience is reflected in the literary works of William Shakespeare, Ernest Hemingway, and Harper Lee.

What does it mean to know? Bruner spent a good part of his life puzzling over that question. Knowledge, Bruner (1986) informs us, is transmitted in two different ways—the logical-scientific and the narrative. The logical-scientific mode “leads to good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, sound argument, and empirical discovery guided by reasoned hypothesis” (p. 13). The narrative mode, on the other hand, leads to good storytelling, gripping drama, and interesting historical accounts. Narratives bring us face to face with the vicissitudes of life—birth and death, love and hate, hope and despair. Bruner (1990) believes humans have a natural predisposition for organizing their experiences around narratives. “We have an ‘innate’ and primitive predisposition to narrative organization that allows us quickly and easily to comprehend and use it” (p. 80). Narrative thinking is not as simple as it may at first appear; it may reflect technical and sophisticated styles of expression. Narrative thinking or storytelling is instrumental for “making meaning that dominates much of life and culture—from soliloquies at bedtime to the weighing of testimony in our legal system” (p. 97).

Ausubel’s Learning Theory

David P. Ausubel came to educational psychology via the route of medicine. After finishing his degree in psychiatry, he returned to graduate school and earned a Ph.D. in developmental psychology. He switched from psychiatry to psychology in order to pursue an academic career in teaching and research. “Psychiatry,” Ausubel (1995) writes, “was completely dominated by psychoanalysis. There was no real opportunity for an academic career in psychiatry, since I viewed psychoanalysis as a farfetched, desperate mythology, with no scientific or empirical basis” (p. 1).

Ausubel (1963a) was one of the principal theorists supporting the educational reform movement of the 1960s and 1970s. He wrote a number of significant books and articles on

teaching and learning. Ausubel encouraged teacher to assist their students in constructing cognitive scaffolding for processing and storing information. Ideas should be assembled into hierarchical patterns similar to the steel framework of a modern skyscraper. “The most inclusive concepts occupy a position at the apex of the structure and subsume progressively less inclusive and more highly differentiated sub-concepts and factual data” (p. 220). Though Ausubel’s theories were generated half-a-century ago, many of his thoughts are still alive and well. The practices of mapping or webbing of ideas along with erecting cognitive scaffolding for teaching higher level thinking skills are still used in classrooms across the nation.

Ausubel views knowledge as representing an integrated system of inclusive and exclusive categories and concepts. Ideas are linked together in an orderly and rational fashion. Mind, metaphorically, is like a Chinese puzzle box. All of the smaller boxes, facts and data, are tucked away inside of progressive larger boxes. “Cognitive structure,” Ausubel (1960) contends, “is hierarchically organized in terms of highly inclusive concepts under which are subsumed less inclusive sub-concepts and informational data” (p. 267).

Ausubel’s learning theory is organized around the idea of subsumption, which he later exchanged for the word assimilation. Like fish swimming in the ocean; the big fish swallow the little fish. Similarly, big ideas subsume smaller ideas. Teaching and learning, reciprocally, are largely matters of erecting cognitive structures (scaffolding) for processing and storing new information. By placing information into its proper category, we are better able to retain it for future use. Forgetting, on the other hand, occurs when smaller ideas are completely assimilated into larger concepts. A cognitive structure that is clear and well organized facilitates the learning and retention of new information. A cognitive structure that is confused and disorderly, on the hand, inhibits learning retention of information. Learning and retention can both be enhanced

through strengthening relevant aspects of cognitive structure. Putting the mind in order is one of the principal objectives of all education. Having a clear and well organized cognitive structure, Ausubel (1968) reminds us, “is also in its own right the most significant independent variable influencing the learner’s capacity for acquiring more new knowledge in the same field” (p. 130).

Given his theory of learning, it is not surprising that Ausubel comes down on the side of teacher directed instruction. Direct teaching lends itself to building logically ordered cognitive structures. Ausubel (1963b) believes most teachers favor this method of instruction. Expository teaching is the most efficient way of organizing classroom instruction. He contends that even laboratory sciences can be taught using the expository method. Though expository teaching has been criticized as being authoritarian, such criticism is unwarranted. “There is nothing inherently authoritarian in presenting or explaining ideas to others as long as they are not obliged, either explicitly or implicitly, to accept them on faith” (p. 160). Teachers have an obligation to share their understanding with their students. Casting aside the teacher’s understanding because it might impose some structure on the students’ thinking is an idea too foolish to require refutation. “Didactic exposition has always constituted the core of any pedagogic system, and, I suspect,” adds Ausubel (1963b), “always will, because it is the only feasible and efficient method of transmitting large bodies of knowledge” (p. 160).

Verbal receptive learning, Ausubel (1963b) informs us, is not necessarily antithetical to higher level thinking, though the method has frequently been characterized as “parrot-like recitation and rote memorization of isolated facts” (p. 15). The problem stems from the widespread confusion “between reception and discovery learning, and between rote and meaningful learning” (p. 15). Reception learning is not invariably rote; likewise, discovery learning is not always meaningful. Either one—reception learning or discovery learning—can be

rote or meaningful. Everything depends upon how the knowledge is treated. If the learner merely memorizes the material (even if the conclusions have been arrived at by the discovery method), then, says Ausubel (1961), “the learning outcomes must necessarily be rote and meaningless” (p. 17). Reception learning or discovery learning may promote either rote or meaningful learning. One does not necessarily infer the other. Thus discovery learning, just like reception learning, may be either rote or meaningful. The whole question of rote learning versus meaningful learning depends upon whether or not the new information is integrated into the learner’s cognitive system.

What determines whether or not learning is meaningful? Knowledge becomes meaningful when we grasp the interrelationship between two or more ideas, old and new. “A first prerequisite for meaningful learning,” Ausubel and Robinson (1969) contend, “is that the material presented to the learner be capable of being related in some ‘sensible’ fashion” (p. 46). The new information must be fitted into a larger pattern or whole. “Second, the learner must possess relevant ideas to which the new idea can be related or anchored” (p. 46). The learner must already possess appropriate subsuming concepts in his or her cognitive structure. “Finally, the learner must actually attempt to relate, in some sensible way, the new ideas to those which he presently possesses” (p. 46). If any of these conditions are missing, the end result will be rote learning.

Advance Organizers

The idea for which Ausubel (1995) is best known is his theory of advance organizers. Few educational innovations, Ausubel tells us, have been more roundly applauded and more frequently misused. Advance organizers are often confused or mixed with other popular doctrines in education. Inquiry teaching and learning styles, for instance, have little or nothing to

do with advance organizers. Advance organizers, in turn, are not all of one stripe. They come to us in many different forms—logical statements, models and graphs, or colorful stories presented at the beginning of a new unit of thought. Advance organizers encapsulate the essence of what a lesson is all about (pp. 1-9). The ideas of space-time in physics, the double-helix in genetics, and style in literature are all examples of advance organizers.

Advance organizers are not to be confused with introductory remarks or brief overviews, which are “typically written at the same level of abstraction, generality, and inclusiveness as the learning material” (Ausubel, 1963b, p. 214). Organizers are abstract ideas presented in advance of the lesson. They represent a higher level of abstraction, generality, and inclusiveness than the new material. Ausubel (1960) believes organizers can be used to assist learners in assimilating new information. Organizers help to bridge the gap between what is already known and what is to be learned. “The learning and retention of unfamiliar but meaningful verbal material can be facilitated by the advance introduction of relevant subsuming concepts” (p. 267). Organizers are particularly useful when learners do not already possess the relevant concepts needed in order to integrate new information into their cognitive systems.

Which students profit the most from the use of organizers? Ausubel and Fitzgerald (1962) believe good students—those who already possess clear and well organized cognitive structures—profit very little from the use of organizers. This is because their minds are already programmed with anchoring ideas. Slow learners, on the other hand, are the ones who benefit the most from the use of organizers. They require additional assistance in learning how to structure their thinking (p. 247). Ausubel’s (1963b) research disclosed another interesting aspect of using organizers. Advance organizers are more useful when working with factual material than when dealing with abstractions. Organizers “facilitate the learning of factual material more than they

do the learning of abstract material, since abstractions in a sense contain their own built-in organizers” (p. 82).

Can advance organizers be used to enhance learning? The research on this question is filled with mixed and conflicting results. Anderson, Spiro, and Anderson (1978), for example, concede that Ausubel’s general theory of subsumers contains much that is valuable for educational practice. They take exception, however, with his research findings. Referring to Ausubel’s work on using organizers to teach reading comprehension, they say, “It is difficult to see why outlining subsequent material in abstract, inclusive terms would help readers” (p. 438). If readers already possess relevant subsuming concepts, they will use them in assimilating new material. When readers do not possess such concepts, there is little reason to believe advance organizers can be used to take their place. Anderson et al. conclude by saying, “the theoretical justification for advance organizers is quite flimsy” (p. 439).

In more recent years scholars have conducted a variety of studies on the use of advance organizers. Most of these studies suggest the use of advance organizers promote slightly higher test scores as compared to instruction not using advance organizers. Mayer (1979) came to the conclusion that, “advance organizers can influence the outcomes of learning if used in appropriate situations and measured properly” (pp. 371-383). Scholars have also conducted a number of meta-analysis studies. Luiten, Ames, and Ackerson (1980) conducted one such study. They arrived at the conclusion that, “The average advance organization study shows a small, but facilitative effect on learning and retention” (p. 217). Stone (1983) concluded from her meta-analysis that, “Overall, advance organizers were shown to be associated with increased learning and retention of material learned” (pp. 194-199). Corkill (1992) summarized the findings from 29 experimental studies over a 14 year period of time. She concluded that the use of advance

organizers facilitated recall. However, advance organizers only, “promote connections between prior knowledge and to-be-learned material” when properly written (pp. 33-63). Finally, Chen and Hirumi (2009) have evaluated advance organizers in relationship to online learning. They concluded that low ability students who use advance organizers perform better on short-term and long-term tests than students who did not use advance organizers.

Ausubel (1995) was keenly aware of the criticism leveled against his theory of advance organizers. He believed the attention paid to them far outweighed their relative importance in relationship to his larger body of work. His views on this matter were shared in personal correspondence with the author. “Advance organizers are not the most important aspect of my work in educational psychology.” They are merely a specific technique for presenting information. “However, they caught the imagination as a gimmick for performing empirical studies. More dissertations—most of them worthless because the organizers used were not genuine—have been written on organizers than on any other topic in psychology” (p. 5).

Stories as Advance Organizers

Advance organizers can either be rational statements or narrative stories. Of the two, stories have a longer shelf-life. The following three stories selected as illustrations in this article serve as benchmarks highlighting some of my own teaching experiences. Other teachers will need to thumb through their own experiences and select those stories that best act as advance organizers for units they are planning to teach. If, for example, a science teacher were planning on introducing a discussion on how different physicists view the nature of the universe, the following story might very well serve as an advance organizer.

Do you remember the movie, *Field of Dreams*? Kevin Costner, who loved baseball, heard a mysterious voice saying, “If you build it, he will come.” As an act of faith, he plowed under

part of his cornfield and turned it into a baseball diamond. When the field was finished, all of the former baseball greats showed up to play. Here is where the story becomes an advance organizer. Who would stand behind home plate and umpire the game? Suddenly three new figures came walking out of the cornfield—Newton, Einstein, and Heisenberg. They all claim they had been waiting an eternity to call balls and strikes. Each was asked a simple question—how do you know when a pitch is a ball and when it is a strike? Newton, who believed in a deterministic universe governed by natural laws, stated flatly, “I call them the way they are.” Einstein, who was the father of relativity, asserted, “I call them the way I see them.” Finally Heisenberg, who was one of pioneer theorists behind quantum mechanics, affirmed, “They aren’t anything until I call them.” Big question: Is there a reality independent of human experience?

When my son, John, was in the third grade, I took him to the museum of natural history. I thought it might serve as an advance organizer for introducing him to the theory of evolution. John and I looked at all of the exhibits on prehistoric animals and fishes. Toward the end of our journey, we came to the exhibit featuring the research of Dr. Leaky, who discovered the fossil remains of early humans in East Africa. Next to the Leaky exhibit was one showing modern great apes. John stood for a long time carefully studying the two exhibits. Finally, I asked, “Well, John, what do you make of it?” John, replying in a thoughtful manner, said, “Well, Dad, it looks like cavemen turned into apes.” John’s story has served as a useful advance organizer for later discussions I have had with my students on the topic of evolution.

A few years ago, I found myself suddenly single. One day when I was walking through the local mall, I happened to bump into a woman I had met at the university. She was accompanied by her two children—a boy of four and a girl of five. They told me that their husband and father had recently died from a heart attack. Wishing to show a little empathy, I

suggested we all go for ice cream. After finishing our cones, I proposed we visit the Dallas Zoo. While we were all walking along, I found myself swinging the boy with my left hand and his sister with my right. Presently, the boy looked up at me and asked, “Do you have a queen?” At first I was taken back—talking about queens is a pretty sophisticated metaphor for a four-year-old. Finally, I replied, “No, but I have been looking everywhere for one. Do you know where I can find a queen?” He pointed to his mother and said, “She’s a queen.” At this point the girl chimed into the conversation, saying, “Yah, our dad died. You could be our dad.” The mother, obviously embarrassed by the idea that her children were actively recruiting a new father, said, “We don’t go around asking men who we have just met to be our father.” The girl, giving her mother a puzzled look, said, “But, Mom, he bought us ice cream.” Could there be a more telling advance organizer for introducing a discussion on metaphor?

Conclusion

Ausubel’s theories present us with a highly logical, deductive approach to teaching and learning. He assumes the placement of a knowledgeable, skilled teacher in front of every classroom. The teacher has not only mastered the material at hand, but he or she has also acquired the art of teaching. Without classroom finesse, everything else is a total waste. The school is, in the full sense of the word, a learning community. Teacher directed instruction, by its very nature, lends itself to the technique of storytelling. The teacher, given his or her greater maturity of experience, is in a position to select appropriate stories for use as advance organizers. The teacher’s role is one of systematically helping his or her students to construct their cognitive systems. The end of the whole process is the education of a person who can formulate rational and humane goals and who is able to select suitable means for realizing those goals.

Storytelling offers us a good example of metaphorical thinking. The English language houses a plethora of colorful metaphors. Using them is not the exclusive privilege of a highly educated mind. Children, as illustrated by the story of the four-year-old boy, are naturally drawn to the use of metaphors. Metaphors represent the Alpha and Omega of human discourse. All of the big ideas in science, history, and the arts are expressed in metaphorical language. How did the universe begin? Physicists tell us it all started with the Big Bang. Similarly, the words in the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” represent a frequently sighted national metaphor. And where would literature be without the rubric of “character flaw”?

What are the marks of an effective story? We are told a picture is worth a thousand words. Stories represent verbal pictures we have created about ourselves and our interactions with the world. Stories have a way of cutting through the chaff, of simplifying complex ideas. Storytelling adds life and imagination to teaching. A good story is often a source of amusement and humor. Storytelling taps into the hopes and dreams of humanity. In an age obsessed with computerized instruction, storytelling needs to play an increasingly important role in helping to humanize teaching and learning. Though musical scores and thoughtful stories can easily be placed on computer disks, there is no substitute for a live performance, either at a concert or in the classroom. Storytelling is the oldest, most pervasive way society has discovered for creating and recreating itself—of inducting each new generation into its cultural motif. If in the troubled times that may lie before us—we wish to appreciably increase the likelihood of some savage upheaval—accelerate the mechanization of instruction and neglect the humanizing effects of

storytelling—then not all the gods sitting on Mount Olympus will be able to save us from the maelstrom that may follow.

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