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# Developing the art of storytelling as a pedagogical tool for academics

■ DR KENDALL JARRETT

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## Abstract

The significance of storytelling to the development of human knowledge and understanding should never be underestimated. As a social construct storytelling is synonymous with learning, yet its use in more formal tertiary education settings is often viewed as problematic due to lecturers' limited creativity, understanding of story suitability and/or pedagogical reluctance. Miller and Pennycuff (2008) remind us though that within formal learning environments, engaging in storytelling can be a way to motivate and engage even the most reluctant learners. Thus, the aim of this article is to showcase to readers four different modes of storytelling (for example, oral, written word, graphic representation, touch) used within teaching with the aim of: 1) helping learners with module content engagement, 2) promoting the use of discussion as a primary pedagogical tool within the classroom, and 3) encouraging critical reflection as a means for professional development.

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## Introduction

This article was developed from the workshop (entitled: 'From occasions of learning in Sri Lanka to experiences of teaching in the inaka: the art of storytelling as a pedagogical tool') that I delivered at the 2018 University of Brighton Learning and Teaching Conference. The primary focus of the workshop was to extend attendees' pedagogical toolkits through consideration and use of storytelling in the classroom. Through the creation and sharing of story the workshop offered attendees a space for collaboration and conversation, as well as having the secondary purpose of assisting the development of a more supportive and connected pedagogical community. Workshop design and content was influenced by two prominent storytelling texts; namely McDrury and Alterio's (2002) *Learning through storytelling in higher education* and Moon's (2010) *Using story: in higher education and professional development*, both of which offered significant insight into the art of storytelling as a pedagogical tool.

The use of storytelling in everyday life helps us to communicate ideas, translate private experience into public discourse, bridge social divides and pass knowledge from generation to generation (Bruner 1986; Miller and Pennycuff 2008). Indeed, McDrury

and Alterio (2002, p. 7) sum up just how prevalent storytelling can be on a daily basis: 'We hear them, we read them, we write them and we tell them'. Prior to investigating how we might utilise and improve the act of storytelling in our classrooms to support student learning, though, it is important to explore the concepts of *story* and *storytelling* so that more informed determinations of their practicality and use in the classroom may be made.

## What is story? What is storytelling?

McDrury and Alterio's reluctance to offer a definition for story in their 2001 text (instead focusing on storytelling), coupled with Moon's (2010) dedication of an entire chapter to the definition of story offers some insight into the apparent challenges of defining such a broad term. For me, two 'features of a story' outlined by Moon (2010) resonated as starting points for my own definitions; that being 'story is a form of representation of the products of human mental functioning' and that 'there may or may not be a listener' as the purpose of a story may be to make 'personal sense of something' (Moon 2010, p. 27). This led me to consider the view that without story there is no storytelling, and without storytelling there is no story. What this realisation offered me was justification for my workshop to solely focus on the act of storytelling and its place in the support of tertiary student learning and to move beyond the more basic structural definitions of story, such as having a beginning, middle and end or containing reference to a character, an issue and a response.

Just like story, storytelling has been described in a multitude of ways. McDrury and Alterio (2002) describe it as a way to knowing, Van Manen (1991) as 'a form of everyday theorising' (p. 204), and Reason and Hawkins (1988) as a mode of inquiry involving cooperative activity. McDrury and Alterio (2002, p. 31) suggest that the act of storytelling 'enables us to convey aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds (real or imagined) that we inhabit' whilst at the same time helping us to understand, reveal and transform our lives (Sandelowski 1991). Moon (2010) suggests that there are eight different media that may carry story: sound; drama and dance; the written word; graphic representation; music; touch; mime; and various altered states (for example, daydreaming). In relation to this, this article will focus on how my use of three of these modes of storytelling within my classroom teaching (i.e. oral, written word, graphic representation) were used to stimulate student engagement and knowledge generation. Furthermore, this article will also detail my use of a fourth mode (for example, touch) within the delivered workshop to provide attendees with an experience of story creation for academic purposes.

## Workshop stories shared

Shank (2006) posits that the social effect of storytelling is educative and that 'telling stories is a means for making sense of everyday experience' (p. 713). It makes sense then for educators to encourage students to tell stories about events they have experienced and to make links between stories of the world and their own stories (McDrury and Alterio 2002). As Pagano (1991) writes 'when we teach we tell stories about the world. Some stories are scientific, some historical, some philosophical and so on' (p. 197). As educators then our use of story becomes pivotal in students' learning journeys and thus requires ongoing assessment and development. Sharing my own

experiences about how I have used story within my own teaching to engage learners with specific discipline content thus offered two outcomes; 1) it supported the development of peers' pedagogical toolkits; and 2) it offered me the opportunity to reflect on and develop my own use of story in the classroom.

I shared three stories within the workshop. The first was a written word story from my time teaching in rural Japan (the *inaka*) entitled 'The nowhere school'. An extract from that story is included below and is followed by comment detailing how I have used this story in my classroom teaching.

### **The Nowhere School**

Have you ever wondered where all the really bad students go to school? Well let me tell you about the Nowhere School. Located in the *inaka*, the Nowhere School provides directionless education for students unlucky enough not to have placed in the upper quartiles of the High School Entrance Exam. They are type-cast from the moment they are reluctantly accepted to become nothing more than forgotten statistics of an education system that supports its achievers and hides its strugglers. The Nowhere School is for students who are going nowhere in life because the education they receive is not modified for their level of learning. So if you are a nowhere student at the Nowhere School, what would you get up to to pass the time away? Let me share with you some sad, but true, tales from the School of Nowhere ...

### **Miss Coffee Table 2000**

One of my first-year students is an asshole. His main aim in life is to get under my skin. The lesson began as usual, students wandering in late, yelling, stinking of cigarette smoke. The classroom was filthy, desks facing different directions, papers scattered everywhere ... So in walks Dickhead (the name I secretly call this airhead) yelling 'sex machine' at the top of his lungs. Despite continued attempts by my Japanese teaching colleague to get him to stop yelling, my lesson proceeds with the same phrase launched every 30 seconds. Obviously this is a natural part of school life as my teaching colleague continues to walk around the room smiling. As I turn to write on the decrepit, stained blackboard, I am confronted by the Dickhead yelling my name, 'Hey, hey, hey'. I turn around to see a large pair of glossy breast thrust towards me. The Dickhead was holding up a centrefold of an adult magazine and proceeded to ask me what I thought ...

As explained in the workshop, I have used this written story when teaching third year teacher education students to highlight and discuss topics ranging from education system deficiencies and inclusive pedagogy requirements, to the pitfalls of being a newly qualified teacher and the maintaining of professional teaching standards. Each sharing of this story also affords me the opportunity to reflect on my role in students'

educational experiences and how much my understanding of the role of the teacher (and my skill set) has altered since this event occurred some 18 years ago.<sup>1</sup>

The second story related to my use of photographs taken at the Asgiriya Cricket Ground in Sri Lanka depicting: 1) a team of touring cricketers left speechless as they peer out over the back of an international cricket ground into the contrasts of a large shanty town; and 2) the groundswoman painting white lines on the cricket pitch. I have used these photos when working with educational leadership postgraduate students to develop stories aimed at challenging perceptions about 'who might hold the knowledge', the importance of recognising 'a more knowledgeable other', and the importance of offering students an 'internationalised curriculum'.

The third story was me relaying a verbal account of a student behaviour issue I witnessed as a supply teacher at a large London academy. A written overview of that story is included below.

I was supply teaching one day at a large London academy and had been given responsibility for a Year 7 music lesson for which I had been given no lesson plan nor class list. With only very limited musical background I developed some semblance of a plan, but frustratingly the students soon realised this was not my forte. With students having permission to use a range of percussion instruments the noise level began to escalate. My efforts to limit this noise were mostly in vain but it meant addressing separate groups of students at a time. As I turned around from one group to the next, I was confronted with the image of a Year 7 boy standing over a Year 7 girl, his arm outstretched towards her neck and shouting 'get back in your place bitch'. Amazingly and sadly, the girl did not flinch at the boy's aggression, and proceeded to simply look up and laugh.

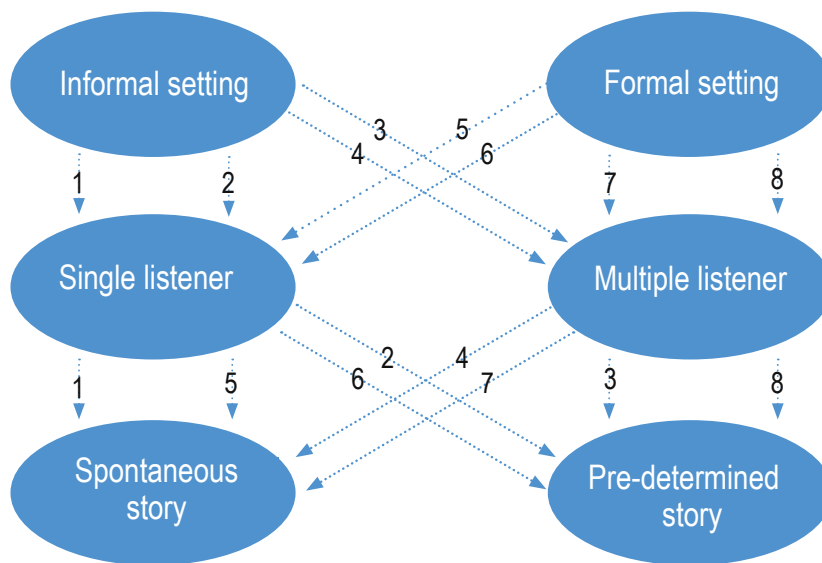
have shared this oral story with BEd and MEd students during pre and post school placement visits as a catalyst for sharing thoughts about, and experiences of teaching, as well as the role of the school community in supporting its staff in general.

## Storytelling pathways

Prior to attendees engaging with the main 'You as the storyteller' activity within the workshop, storytelling pathways were discussed as a framework that could be used by educators to develop their story usage in the classroom. Developed by McDrury and Alterio (2001), pathways are made up of different combinations of key story characteristics identified as: 1) the *setting* (formal or informal); 2) the *listeners* (one or many); and 3) the *story* (spontaneous or pre-determined). When different combinations of characteristics are utilised a different storytelling pathway is created (see Diagram 1, over). For academics an understanding of which storytelling pathway is being utilised is important in order to enhance the story's reflective potential (McDrury and Alterio 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, each time I share this story and revisit what I wrote, I am struck by how limited my capacity was at the time to appreciate the nuances of that unique learning environment, as well as how judgemental I was of students who did not hold the same view of education as I did.



**Diagram 1: Storytelling pathways (adapted from McDrury and Alterio, 2001)**

McDrury and Alterio (2001) posit that pathways 1-4 are more aligned to cathartic release, whereas pathways 5-8 are more likely to result in greater opportunities for reflective learning. Hence, storytelling aligned to Pathway 8 offers with it the most learning potential.

### 'You as the storyteller' activity

The main storytelling activity offered within the workshop required attendees to use different artefacts (randomly chosen items from home and office and placed on each workshop table) to create a story that related to a concept/issue each individual taught within their discipline area. Five minutes were allocated to the task followed by the sharing of story with a colleague. At the conclusion of story sharing, attendees were asked to consider which pathway their storytelling most aligned with and how this understanding might influence their future use of storytelling within the classroom.

My inclusion of this activity reflected my desire to, in some way, emulate the outcomes reported by Shank (2006) in her study into the use of teacher storytelling as a means to develop collaborative and collegial communities of practice. Thus, I envisaged that engagement in a cross-disciplinary storytelling activity would help create a collaborative learning space and enable attendees to 'reflect on their teaching' as well as 'co-construct a shared understanding of good pedagogy' (Shank 2006, p. 711).

To further assist attendees invest in their own pedagogical development and 'see themselves in new ways' (Shank 2006, p. 714) with respect to their own pedagogical confidence, three storytelling activities adapted from McDrury and Alterio (2002) were then showcased within the workshop (see Table 1, over.) These three activities were chosen based on their relative simplicity and ease of use for academics new to using storytelling in their classrooms.

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Jump Starts</b> | The educator reads out six sentence beginnings, then asks students to complete all sentences using endings which involve (real or imagined) professional practice situations, for example: ‘She arrived late ...’; ‘The door opened...’; ‘It was a mess ...’ |
| <b>Add-ons</b>     | The educator makes a verbal statement related to a predetermined topic. Students contribute an <i>add-on</i> to the statement. There are no set rules about sentence length.   |
| <b>Newspaper</b>   | Stick enlarged newspaper headings around the room. Students choose a heading and write a 50-word story. Each student reads out another student’s story.  |

**Table 1: Storytelling activities, adapted from McDrury and Alterio (2002)**

## Challenges of using storytelling in the classroom

The final portion of the workshop was a discussion around the main challenges perceived in relation to the use of storytelling in the classroom. The three main challenges perceived were: 1) educators’ perceived limited creativity; 2) understanding of story suitability; and 3) pedagogical reluctance. A ‘why not try it and see’ approach was offered as an immediate suggestion in response to said challenges, as well as the suggestion of peer trialing of storytelling amongst academics teaching in the same discipline area.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

This article gave details of a workshop delivered to educators interested in learning more about storytelling and its use as a pedagogical tool in higher education. Through the showcasing of four different modes of storytelling (for example, oral, written word, graphic representation, touch) attendees were also given the opportunity to create and share their own discipline specific stories applicable to their own current teaching. This sharing of story enabled the creation of a collaborative and collegial learning space for attendees to invest in a community of practice keen to be involved in ‘good pedagogy’. Storytelling pathways and activities devised by McDrury and Alterio (2002) were also promoted as tools that might help educators to develop stories applicable for use in the classroom, as well as introduce students to storytelling as a part of everyday learning. The use of my own stories and discussion with attendees around how I have used these stories within my teaching, was a key feature of the workshop and provided me with the opportunity to once again critically reflect on my understanding and use of story in the classroom.

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<sup>2</sup> For those keen to trial storytelling with their students the ‘Learning through storytelling’ resource on the HEA website offers a step-by-step guide designed to assist academics. Available at: <https://heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/learning-through-storytelling-0>.



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## Biography

**Dr Kendall Jarrett** is a lecturer in Higher Education and Academic Practice at the University of Kent (UK). His teaching and research, which predominantly relates to the exploration of instructional pedagogies and applied educational leadership, is informed by global experiences of teaching and studying in Australia, UK, Japan and New Zealand. As such he is regularly asked to review articles and proposals for a number of pedagogy focused journals and publishing houses. As a Senior Fellow of HEA he is committed to working with colleagues from all discipline areas to advance their teaching, learning and curriculum design capabilities.

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