

How Education Can Shape a New Story in a Post- Pandemic World



Brock Education

A journal of educational research and practice

2020 Vol. 29 (2) 6–12

<https://journals.library.brocku.ca/brocked>

Susan M. Drake* and Joanne L. Reid

Brock University

Abstract

Globally, nations are grappling with massive social and economic disruptions and the disparities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The world is in the middle of a wicked problem—one so complex that it is difficult to find a solution. The “Story Model” was developed as a transdisciplinary curriculum model and a collaborative problem-solving model for K to 16. The model can address wicked problems in ways that traditional problem-solving procedures cannot because it allows for messiness, multilayered complexity, and a big picture perspective. With a deeper understanding of the interdependent and interconnected patterns occurring both locally and globally, educators and students alike can contribute actively to shaping a new story that reflects their values, beliefs, and actions.

Keywords: Story Model, wicked problem solving, transdisciplinary curriculum, post-pandemic, new story

* sdrake@brocku.ca

COVID-19 has turned the world upside down. Globally, nations are grappling with the massive social and economic disruptions created and the disparities exposed by the pandemic. Dramatic antiracist protests have made clear that the status quo cannot continue. Governments struggle to resolve seemingly irreconcilable tensions: protecting the health of individuals versus reviving the health of the economy, and enforcing order versus expressing dissent. As uncertainty and apprehension continue, the world is in the middle of a wicked problem—one so complex that it is difficult to find a solution. The old story isn't working anymore. It is time to create a new story. Education has a role to play in that creation.

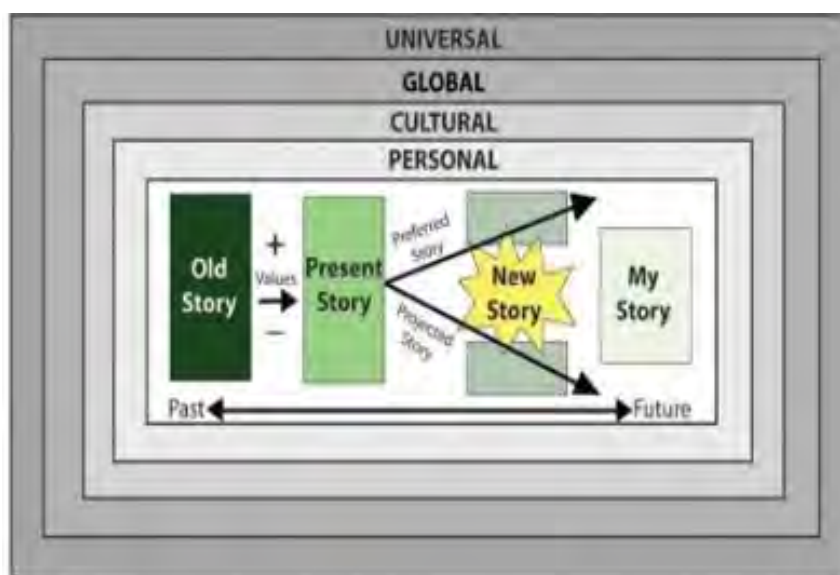
The "Story Model" was developed as a transdisciplinary curriculum model and a collaborative problem-solving model (Drake et al., 1992). Teachers from K to 16 and beyond have applied this framework; at this time, it is most often applied in higher education. The model can address wicked problems such as the pandemic in ways that traditional problem-solving procedures cannot because it allows for multilayered complexity and a big picture perspective. With a deeper understanding of the interdependent and interconnected patterns occurring both locally and globally, educators and students alike can contribute actively to shaping a new story that reflects their values, beliefs, and actions.

The Story Model Framework

Narrative is a way that humans interpret the world; hence, the concept of *story* informs the model (see Figure 1). At the heart of the model is the change process—the shifting dynamic from the past to the present and into the future.

Figure 1

The Story Model Framework



Note. Adapted from *Developing an Integrated Curriculum Using the Story Model* (Drake et al., 1992).

The concentric frames around the model refer to ways of knowing that affect individual meaning-making. Being aware of multiple perspectives helps explain why different people interpret the impact of this virus differently. The issue of face masks can help illustrate each frame. The most basic lens is the *personal*. Age and personal experience influence reactions to wearing a mask. For some, it is self-protection and protecting others as recommended/mandated by health authorities. For others, the refusal to wear one is an assertion of their human right to personal freedom. The second lens is the *cultural* layer. What values and beliefs permeate our cultural stories and practices? In the East, wearing a mask is a long-accepted behaviour and therefore easier to enforce. In North America, wearing masks is a new behaviour open to resistance. The third lens is *global*. Although globalization has been a dominant force for many years, COVID-19 has dramatically demonstrated the interconnectedness of all nations. The sharing of international experiences and research has prompted the recommendation to wear masks. The outer *universal* lens focuses on the human experiences. Globally, the virus has instilled fear and confusion as well as empathy and bravery. Fear and health education and local mandates prompted a skyrocketing demand for masks. Empathy prompted volunteers to sew and give away thousands of masks.

Exploring the issue using a transdisciplinary web (Figure 2) reveals the tangled network of interconnected aspects needing recognition. The centre can be the pandemic itself. Equally effective is to put any aspect of the pandemic in the centre. When students unpack different present-day stories (such as sports, fashion, food, and entertainment), both the old and the emerging new story become more clear. Younger students can work with fewer words in the web and brainstorm what they know about those words. Instead of words like “economy,” the teacher can use a more age-appropriate word like “money.”

Figure 2

The Transdisciplinary Web



Note. Adapted from *Developing an Integrated Curriculum Using the Story Model* (Drake et al., 1992).

The Dialectic Dance: Creating a Collaborative Response

Let's look at the framework's centre (Figure 1). The model asks us to consider the past and the dominant values and behaviours that have driven the "old" story and influence the present. The Spanish flu of 1918 informed us that teaching health education in schools was the most effective weapon to combat the pandemic (Bernhardt, 2020; Mlynaryk & Makovac, 2020). The SARS epidemic of 2003 is influencing current research (Webster, 2020). The values embedded in this old story? In North America, success has often been measured by money and power which has led to, for example, greed and devaluing those earning lower wages.

Moving into the new story, the path diverges into two possible and seemingly opposite directions. The projected story is a return to the old story with our old set of values, beliefs, and actions. By contrast, the preferred story is based on an idealistic vision of life with a new set of values, beliefs, and actions.

Creating the new story is the conscious act of keeping the best/necessary of the old story and the realistic aspects of the preferred story. This conscious story can be created by individuals, media, organizations, churches, schools, societies, and countries. Applying the Story Model, societies see-saw between the tensions of seeming opposites. One essential tension of the pandemic is between economics and health (Prouse et al., 2020). Many other "either/or" tensions, too many to list, are interwoven: economics or the environment; privacy or surveillance; individual freedom or collective responsibility, and so on. Other tensions have also emerged such as inequalities and racism (Yang et al., 2020). To mask or not to mask has become a central conflict representing responsibility to protect others or protect individual rights.

The dialectical dance means a constant shifting back and forth between two opposing positions until we negotiate a new story. The new story is not an either/or choice; it is more of a selective synthesis, reconciliation, or resolution. The answer is a both/and solution. For example, we look for ways to honour both the economy and health. For masks, the solution may be to use masks responsibly in defined risk contexts and not in less risky ones. Martin (2007) defines this process as integrative thinking—generating a solution that contains elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to either one.

Law and education (media, research) propel this negotiation. When mandatory masks were adopted in many jurisdictions in North America, it was a response to a dialectic dance between legislation and health education (Zafar, 2020). The new story emerges bit by bit until it is taken for granted. The new story is the new norm. Each individual acts to shape the new story, but a resolution is a *collective* act, although it will not be a universal consensus. The preferred story created collaboratively and globally becomes a new metanarrative to live by.

Acting to Shape the New Story

As the world responds to the pandemic at the personal, cultural, and global levels, educators from all cultures can walk their students through parts, or all, of the Story Model. What is my personal story during the pandemic? How does my cultural story affect my experiences? What is happening globally? What does my experience have in common with people globally? What do I really value? My cultural values? What does a new story look like? How can I/we make the new story happen?

Aware of the frames, students can reflect on the world as they knew it before COVID-19—the old story. Based on the actions of my society, what is the old story? What do we value? A dark side has emerged revealing greed (Campbell, 2020), racism (Chotiner, 2020) and ageism (Picard, 2020). Alongside is compassion (Dittrich, 2020), social connection (“Lean in to Social Connections,” 2020), and humour and resilience (Buscaramarty, 2020).

Observing the dialectical dance, students can brainstorm for new stories. Emerging new stories include redesigned cityscapes (“One Way Sidewalks,” 2020), guaranteed minimum income (Mason, 2020), a cleaner environment (Tienhaara et al., 2020), blended online and face-to-face learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020), and kindness for others (Thorpe, 2020).

Teachers and students are a part of the major global disruptions. They can also be part of the solution. The power of Greta Thunberg to move mountains for a better environment (Good, 2019) shows that students can be a part of the collective agency in creating the new story. Teachers at any level can take the whole class through the framework by placing an age-appropriate issue (e.g., bicycles, cars, makeup, or the pandemic) at the centre of the transdisciplinary web. The next step is to look for connections through the different lens of the web and for embedded values. Having witnessed this connection process with literally hundreds of topics, we know that everything connects and the values driving the current story will be similar regardless of topic. Using these connections/values, students can explore the past, the present, and the negotiation of the seeming opposite paths leading to the future new story. The last step of the Story Model is to make a commitment to the new story with consciously chosen values—a personal action plan.

Following the Story Model process expands any topic beyond a simplistic analysis to a more in-depth one. The complexity, yet simplicity, of the framework makes it suitable for addressing wicked problems. Younger children are able to explore issues as a whole class. In the higher grades, students can move from whole class instruction to apply the framework individually or in groups to a topic of their own interest and follow through with their own research and class presentations. Students at the university level can apply the framework to present their own research through undergrad papers to doctoral dissertations. In short, the number of times and

ways that the Story Model is applied to explore current issues helps students and educators alike to name the desired values and then act on them to consciously make the new story a reality.

References

- Bernhardt, D. (2020, April 11). How the Spanish flu compares to COVID-19: Lessons learned, answers still being pursued. *CBC News*.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/spanish-flu-covid-coronavirus-canada-manitoba-1.5523410>
- Buscaramarty, D. (2020, April 28). Forty days, forty delights: How we used memes, games and challenges to pass the weeks of the coronavirus isolation. *The Globe and Mail*.
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-forty-days-forty-delights-how-we-used-memes-games-and-challenges-to/>
- Campbell, B. S. (2020, April 30). Corporate greed knows no bounds, even during a global pandemic. *Canada's National Observer*.
<https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/04/30/opinion/corporate-greed-knows-no-bounds-even-during-global-pandemic>
- Chotiner, I. (2020, May 7). How racism is shaping the coronavirus pandemic. *The New Yorker*.
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/how-racism-is-shaping-the-coronavirus-pandemic>
- Drake, S. M., Bebbington, J., Laksman, S., Mackie, P., & Wayne, L. (1992). *Developing an integrated curriculum using the story model*. OISE Press.
- Dittrich, V. (2020, March 30). COVID-19: Canada to emerge a more “compassionate society” after pandemic, poll finds. *National Post*. <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/covid-19-canada-to-emerge-as-a-more-compassionate-society-after-global-pandemic-study>
- Good, J. E. (2019, September 30). GOOD: Greta Thunberg’s radical climate change fairy tale is exactly the story we need. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/greta-thunbergs-radical-climate-change-fairy-tale-is-exactly-the-story-we-need-124252>
- “Lean in to social connections” during COVID-19 pandemic, experts advise. (2020, March 21). *CBC Radio*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/lean-in-to-social-connections-during-covid-19-pandemic-experts-advise-1.5505096>
- Martin, R. (2007). *The opposable mind: How successful leaders win through integrative thinking*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Mason, G. C. (2020, June 28). How to build a better Canada after COVID-19: Transform CERB into a basic annual income program. *The Conversation*. <https://tinyurl.com/y5o4e9g8>

- Mlynaryk, J., & Makovac, D. (2020, May 13). Looking back: The 1918 flu epidemic and its impact on the pandemic today. *OISE News*.
https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/News/2020/The_1918_flu_pandemic_and_education_in_Ontario.html
- One way sidewalks? Westmount taking measure to reduce close contact. (2020b, April 10). *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/westmount-covid-19-sidewalks-one-way-1.5529199>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2020). *E-Learning Ontario: Blended learning*.
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/elearning/blend.html>
- Picard, A. (2020, April 13). “Human rights don’t have a best-before date”: COVID-19 lays bare rampant ageism. *The Globe and Mail*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-human-rights-dont-have-a-best-before-date-covid-19-lays-bare/>
- Prouse, C., Mullings, B., Perez, D. L. M., & Clarke, S. (2020, July 5). Rethinking the boundaries between economic life and coronavirus death. *The Conversation*.
<https://theconversation.com/rethinking-the-boundaries-between-economic-life-and-coronavirus-death-140120>
- Tienhaara, K., Janzwood, A., & Carter, A. (2020, June 30). How to build a better Canada after COVID-19: Launch a fossil-free future. *The Conversation*.
<https://theconversation.com/how-to-build-a-better-canada-after-covid-19-launch-a-fossil-free-future-140691>
- Thorpe, J. (2020, July 1). How to build a better Canada after COVID-19: The power of everyday actions can bring about change. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-to-build-a-better-canada-after-covid-19-the-power-of-everyday-actions-can-bring-about-change-140687>
- Webster, P. (2020, March 21). Canada and Covid-19: Learning from SARS. *The Lancet*, 395(10228), 936–937. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30670-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30670-X)
- Yang, J., Allen, K., Mendleson, R., & Bailey, A. (2020, June 28). Toronto’s COVID-19 divide: The city’s northwest corner has been “failed by the system.” *Toronto Star*.
<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/06/28/torontos-covid-19-divide-the-citys-northwest-corner-has-been-failed-by-the-system.html>
- Zafar, A. (2020, July 3). How to make COVID-19 mask-wearing a habit: Social scientists offer some suggestions. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/covid-19-masks-convincing-1.5635789>