Scheherazade's secret:
the power of stories and the desire to learn

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In this paper I use a story to introduce the idea of stories in adult educational practice. Telling stories seems to be as old as human culture. MacIntyre referred to humans as 'story-telling animals' (1981: 201). The secret is the ways in which this storytelling capacity can be used in a holistic humanistic pedagogy.

Education, the process of assisting others to learn, can be pursued by seeking to pass on information (propositional pedagogy); by showing how to do something (skilling pedagogy) and by inviting learners to become different (transformative pedagogy). Many actual educational exchanges involve learners in more than one kind of learning where the educational event has elements of information and skills transfer, often combined at least tacitly with an invitation to become different.

In this paper I suggest that the telling of stories that capture the imagination and move the heart is a powerful pedagogy in inviting

learning not so much to do with gaining new information, although this can often happen, nor transferring skills, which again can also occur, but with a deeper transformative form of learning, which is really more about learners changing their identity, their way of seeing and acting upon the world.

Introduction

The title of this paper goes back to the mythical Arabian Nights when a legendary king used to take a new wife and after one night would order her killed and would take another. Scheherazade, one of the available young women, offered herself to the king and held him in thrall with her stories so that he delayed her execution, and slowly modified his approach to life as he reflected on the mystery, excitement and grandeur of her tales and allowed them further purchase on his soul. He ceased his murderous practice and eventually married her. Scheherazade's secret was to evoke a response from the king's hitherto undeveloped capacity for wisdom and compassion through her use of imaginal and archetypal stories, which were based not so much in historical fact as in the human capacity to be struck and transformed by accessible truth and wisdom. Other evocative stories are based more in historical reality but, in a way not dissimilar to Scheherazade's performance, real incidents are then represented and interpreted in a story that makes their implications and messages visible and challenging.

It is the use of stories in fostering learning that is of interest here. Stories and learning have multiple dimensions, which I will discuss briefly after giving a real example of the pedagogic impact of a story drawn from real life. This is the story of John Howard Griffin, the white man who dyed his skin black and lived for more than a month as a black itinerant worker in the southern states of the USA. Griffin's restrained and vivid story, told in his book *Black like me,* created a strong learning ferment among black and white American readers.

His realistic story, which caught his readers up in his portrayed experience, convinced them to accept the inhumane reality of their divided American society where whites excluded, humiliated and oppressed their black neighbours, which either they had denied or of which they were actually ignorant. Let us begin with the white activist John Howard Griffin and his story of racial adventure in the deep south of the USA.

Black like me

In 1956 John Howard Griffin, a white Christian social justice activist and journalist, carried out a social experiment in the southern states of the USA. He dyed his skin black and spent more than a month as a black man travelling in the south of the USA in search of work. He told the story of his 'black' experience in his book *Black like me*, published in 1961. From the moment his experiment started and he had become 'black', he could not believe his exclusion from familiar citizen activities. He tells of walking for miles in search of work, being refused a seat in cafes, refused service at bus stops, and excluded from public toilets unless they were specially designated for blacks. He was ignored and sometimes abused in public places by white people. This upright, well-regarded citizen started to keep a low profile to avoid being the butt of white violence, knowing that the law would not protect him. He noted the strength of his distaste, fear and distress. He also pointed out, more analytically, that the racist behaviour of individual whites was condoned, if not encouraged, by mainstream American and Christian culture. He saw that he and many other so-called good white Americans were unwittingly compliant.

Griffin's book became a bestseller. He was feted and threatened at the same time. His black/white story became a catalyst for the 'white awareness' movement, leading to current culture where black voices have replaced their white interpreters and amplifiers. To read this book now is to hear an aesthetic and cultivated person confronted

with an inhuman social regime pursued in the southern region of the USA under his nose. He began to realise that the form of egalitarian and respectful Christian whiteness practised by him and his family was often not the one in common use. He felt wretched; images of black degradation and neglect stayed with him; his analytical mind was spinning as he tried to understand how a nominally Christian country could condone or even promote such rejection and subjugation. He concluded that much of this neglect was not known and certainly the experience of such disdainful exclusion was not understood. He decided to tell his story to white America of what, even to the small extent of his experience, being black is like: what he saw and felt, how his mind spun in confusion and his heart felt in disarray. His skilful, objective, journalistic writing invited his readers to dwell on the facts rather than his understated response. Many readers felt themselves walking the same hot, dusty road with no access to drinks and food for sale. They were beside him as he applied in vain for labouring work, was turned away from cheap accommodation and forced to stand in the overcrowded black section of a half-empty bus. They were shocked, ashamed, angry and became persuaded to work for social reform.

The question here is in what ways narrative like this can generate learning. This needs a brief look at learning and then at narrative. Learning is 'the active process through which people consciously [and sometimes unconsciously] pay attention, perceive things, remember them and think about them' (Little, McAllister & Priebe, 1991: 51). I explore it in four modes. Storytelling, in general terms, is the way a person describes events in a time sequence (Rimmon-Kenan 2006: 10). I examine it here as a special form of structured human communication.

Learning in four modalities

John Heron (1992), a phenomenologist of human communication, suggested that the experience of human knowing and learning involves four interconnected modalities. The first modality encompasses forms of 'embodied sensation and feeling'. This leads to the second modality, experienced as 'metaphoric, intuitive and heartfelt image creation'. The third modality involves 'conceptual analysis and critique', which leads finally to 'praxis or reflective action'. Kasl and Yorks (2002) have developed Heron's ideas, as I have in the following. It is Heron's basic insight rather his specific elaborations that I have found helpful.

The first mode of knowing and learning, 'embodied sensation and feeling', is generated in the initial awareness of a new sensation or feeling.

In Heron's second mode of knowing and learning, the 'imaginal', the learner sees and dwells on the initial sensations or feelings presented through the first mode in a metaphoric and narrative way. This mode is often linked to significant personal change, which the learner produces as a metaphoric or imaginal presentation of the power and reach of the learning experience. Imaginal knowing (Hillman, 1981; Corbin, 1969) is not the same as the workings of the imagination, which are much broader and full of real and unreal possibilities. Imaginal processes are not concerned with fantasy; they are linked to images through which people consciously or unconsciously represent and value things and experiences seemingly instinctively and often without full awareness. These, according to Hillman (1981), are supported by 'generative' images that hold the imagination and move the heart, the influence of which is somehow present deep in the person's psyche. This imaginal approach suggests further that these personal generative images and ideals are influenced by powerful more or less hidden images, which Jung (1968) called 'archetypes', located in the unconscious mind. Following a general Jungian line,

Hillman suggested that, with varying degrees of self-awareness, people build and develop their own images and self-stories through which they create their own style, values and personal myths.

Thus, this imaginal representation of an experience of transformative knowing and learning is linked to human mythopoesis (Macdonald, 1981; Bradbeer, 1998; Holland & Garman, 2008), which is the creation of significant life-interpreting and life-guiding stories. This metaphoric and imaginal representational process is usually carried in colourful, immediate stories.

The third mode of knowing, 'conceptual analysis and critique', is the foundation of logical rational approaches to knowing and learning. This is the radical moment of intellectual appraisal when chaotic and disturbing questions are in some way confronted.

Finally the fourth mode of knowing and learning is 'reflective action', sometimes called 'praxis'. This final mode refers to the feedback from chosen action. There is an implicit suggestion that much thinking, feeling and imagining leads to new knowledge and ways of being in the world, and takes on yet another dimension when put into action in the context of embodied life with others. These four themes are abstract categories that are not necessarily realised neatly in real knowing and learning where one mode can be seen to co-exist with another.

What follows is the second theoretical excursion into the nature of narrative and narrative knowing.

Stories and narrative

Rimmon-Kenan (2006: 10) referred to his early and noticeably essentialist definition of narrative: 'someone telling someone else that something happened' with the suggestion that this definition needed to be modified to account for media forms of narrative, which do not have a simple teller. He suggested that two significant characteristics

of narratives remain. The first characteristic is that it is a 'longitudinal sequence of events' and the second is that this 'sequence of events is told by a teller'.

Arthur Frank (2000: 354) suggested that narrative is an abstract term for the structure of a story rather than its full reality, which is contained in the actual idea of story. For him stories re-affirm and re-construct relationships; they can provide a kind of healing; they are more than data for analysis and they are told to be heard, to be listened to, to capture the imagination and move the heart and to find others who will answer their call for a relationship. For him story has pedagogic dimensions in its agenda to shape and create relationships. Flowing on from this, Bochner's ideas (2002: 80) suggest that stories have four common elements. First of all people are represented as *characters* in the story. Secondly there is some kind of *plot* with a critical moment that resolves the dramatic tension. The third element is *time*; stories place things in temporal order. Finally, stories have to have some kind of *point*, which tends to have a pedagogic dimension.

Manfred Jahn (2005: N2.2.2) suggested that narratives need to be separated into fictional and nonfictional forms. Fictional forms present an imaginary narrator's account of a story that happened in an imaginary world. It is appreciated for its entertainment and educational value and for possibilities that could possibly occur. Nonfictional or factual narrative presents a real-life person's account of a real-life story where there is a claim that the described events actually happened, although it is understood that such 'real' events in a story have become *represented real events* under the perspective and concerns of the storyteller.

Baumeister and Newman (1994: 679) explored the agenda of stories. They distinguished two general categories: firstly stories aimed at *affecting* listeners in some way and secondly stories whose main objective is a way of *making sense* of experiences. It is useful in narrative research to be aware of the kinds of narrative motivations

being pursued by the teller of a story as well as the kind of knowledge she or he is seeking to create.

Reflecting on stories concerned with interpreting and making sense of experience, Reissman spoke of this kind of narrative research as a way that people 'impose order on the flow of experiences to make sense of events and actions in their lives' (1993: 2).

Stories will often have these affective and rational elements seeking to capture the imagination and move the heart of the listeners. The more the story works to evoke the imagination and the heart the more it can be seen as focusing on imaginal knowing, Heron's second modality of knowing and learning mentioned above. The more these themes have a certain gravitas concerned with major themes of life the more such stories become linked with mythopoesis (Macdonald, 1981; Hillman, 1981; Bradbeer, 1998).

Narrative mythopoesis: the storyteller, story and telling

Mythopoetic stories resonate with great 'mythic' themes in human life: birth and death, youth, maturation and decline, war and peace, enmity and friendship, love and sexuality, conflict and resolution, work and achievement, work loss and anomie. Under most circumstances, you cannot have a narrative imaginal story about a mundane shopping excursion or going to the football—unless of course such events for some are not mundane but are infused with excitement and tribal passion.

Imaginal stories carry a certain gravitas and contribute to mythopoetic life. They are shaped and their authority endorsed by the teller, who needs to have or claim some narrative authority over the listeners. This can be because of the office of a person like priest, professor or judge, or it can be a claimed authority from a person playing an authoritative role in a drama. Narrative imaginal stories when used as pedagogy need to be told with as much leverage and

credibility as possible in order to endorse the dramatic invitation to another but still relevant world.

A second element is *appropriate literary artistry* since narrative imaginal stories seek to capture the imagination of the listeners and maintain a kind of enchantment and suspension of judgement. The audience has to feel and be caught up in the invitational undertones of different kinds of imagery and media.

A third element is *dramatic form*. In some cases the dramatic form can be the simple, well-crafted text. In others, the imaginal, pedagogic narrative with its tacit challenges is given aesthetic strength by music, poetry and drama. As Hamlet (*Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2) said in an aside to the audience before the performance of a play that he had modified to expose the wrongdoing of his uncle, the newly crowned king: 'The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.'

Dramatised stories were used by Morey (2010) and by August Boal (1992, 1995) and collaborators in his work on the 'drama of the oppressed'.

A fourth element is *delayed and dramatic denouement*. Narrative imaginal pedagogy seeks to create dramatic tension and delayed resolution of the themes and plots at play in the story being told. This is where the tacit element in this kind of narrative pedagogy emerges. The element of surprise is designed to increase the impact of the contradictions that are hinted at originally and perhaps made visible during the body of the story, between what people say they do in following espoused customs and beliefs and what they may actually do from time to time without being consciously aware of deviation from espoused ideals.

Imaginal narrative pedagogy, with its various cultural vehicles, is designed to catch the conscience of others similarly placed and to

create a clarifying mythopoetic and moral experience to sharpen and renew a blurred moral stance.

Narrative links with four modes

A carefully wrought story can integrate Heron's four modes of knowing in representing the texture and appeal of a learning episode. The storyteller, who may or may not be the learner, often begins by mentioning a raw and troubling event or events that the learner has encountered. Its gravity can be represented by describing the learner's responsive awareness and bodily responses. The storyteller can then move to more expressive representation by using metaphors from her or his repertoire to represent the raw impact of the event. These metaphors tend to be drawn from archetypal images in the storyteller's culture. The story picks up intensity in this imaginal mode; it displays with colour and urgency the texture and impact of the challenging event on the learner.

The storyteller then shows how the learner appraises the event, seeking analytical categories to which it might belong, its causes and finally what action is required in response. The quality of this third, more logical and rational mode of knowing and learning tends to be more rational and measured. It tells of the analytical reflection and considered choice for action rather than a more impulsive response. The story then moves to praxis, the fourth modality of learning, where the learning is validated in action.

In this praxis mode of learning, the storyteller can report on the learning that took place when the chosen responses to the unsettling new situation were put into practice. In the challenge of personal and social change this final mode of reflective action is a specific kind of learning. Its impact is linked to what it was actually like when the chosen change was implemented. What actually happened? How did it feel? How did others react? Were there unexpected side effects? What did it achieve? Was it actually the right thing to do?

This overall narrative agenda with its links to the four modalities of learning has influenced the approach to education and learning being explored here. John Howard Griffin's disturbing story of his anti-racist awakening, which I summarised at the beginning of this paper, highlights the dimensions of learning in action. His story of becoming and changing carries significant elements of Heron's four modes of learning.

His representation of his heightened bodily awareness of the black experience—hearing the sound of patronising white voices and fearful black voices and his other bodily experiences of 'life as black'—form much of the initial power of his book. His story of his life as a black itinerant worker goes further. He reveals not only his initial bodily reactions and feelings but metaphorically his initial 'un-reflected upon' imaginal awareness of being black in America. He felt images of himself as dirty, feral and vulnerable under the hostile white gaze and images of himself as welcome and acceptable under the inclusive black gaze.

Griffin's story then dwells on the shocking images that he saw and registered as he struggled to find analytical categories to understand the racist regime with which he had to admit that, as an unaware and non-resistant white, he was at least to some extent complicit. With these disturbing images fresh in his mind he then reflected on the weakness in America's unequal and demeaning version of western democracy. He also revealed and challenged the racial blindness of his own powerful Christian religion which, for reasons he struggled to understand, had not condemned racism and promoted equality and inclusivity. His analytical reflection also pointed to possibilities for reform in American democracy. He pointed to its constitution and its acceptance of the power of individual citizens under free speech to reveal injustice and to mobilise public opinion against it. His transformative experience, with its images and analytical critique, led to his enlightened choice for action. He spent much of the rest of

his short life campaigning for civil rights for blacks and made a major contribution to subsequent changes in American society.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced stories used in imaginal narrative pedagogy as elements in Scheherazade's narrative secret which combined her capacity to capture the listener's imagination with the imaginal power to precipitate moral reflection. By understanding and catering for the fourfold nature of human knowing and learning, John Howard Griffin's nonfictional narrative and Scheherazade's fictional narrative pedagogy are revealed as powerful sources of learning and transformation for holistic educators.

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