

Exchanges: the Warwick Research Journal

Volume 1, Issue 2, April 2014

<http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk>

Storytelling as a trigger for sharing conversations

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Abstract

This article explores whether traditional oral storytelling can be used to provide insights into the way in which young people of 12-14 years identify and understand the language of emotion and behaviour. Following the preliminary analysis, I propose that storytelling may trigger sharing conversations. My research attempts to extend the social and historical perspectives of Jack Zipes, on fairy tales, into a sociological analysis of young people's lives today. I seek to investigate the extent that the storytelling space offers potential benefits as a safe place for young people to share emotions and experiences, and learn from one another. My research analysis involved NVivo coding of one-hour storytelling and focus group sessions, held over five weeks. In total, there were six groups of four children, of mixed ethnicity, gender, ability, and socio-economic background, from three schools within Warwickshire. The results confirmed that the beneficial effects of the storytelling space include a safe area for sharing emotions and experiences, and in general for supporting young people outside formal learning settings.

Keywords

Storytelling, Narrative, Sociology of emotion, Zipes, Sharing Conversations

Introduction

[A]ll we sociologists have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, which sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to intelligent use in theorizing about social life. (Silverman 1998: 111)

In *Breaking the Magic Spell* and *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Jack Zipes discusses what potential stories have as a vehicle for influencing behaviour (1979; 1991; 2006). Zipes summarises the way in which stories, and the creation of children's literature as a genre, have historically been used to influence children's behaviour. He asserts that stories have the power

to socialise young people in particular ways. The use of moralistic stories, for instance, asserts pressure on young people to conform: ‘to cultivate feelings of shame and to arouse anxiety in children when they did not conform to a more inhibiting way of social conduct’ (Zipes, 2006: 22). Take for example Aesop’s fable of ‘The Horse and the Stag’,

The Horse had the plain entirely to himself. A Stag intruded into his domain and shared his pasture. The Horse, desiring to revenge himself on the stranger, requested a man, if he were willing, to help him in punishing the Stag. The man replied, that if the Horse would receive a bit in his mouth, and agree to carry him, he would contrive very effectual weapons against the Stag. The Horse consented, and allowed the man to mount him. From that hour he found that, instead of obtaining revenge on the Stag, he had enslaved himself to the service of man.

The moral here being, ‘He who seeks to injure others often injures only himself’ (Aesop: 1484). Zipes argues that such morals and lessons in children’s literature have the potential to affect young people’s behaviour by providing them with examples of appropriate social conduct.

As part of my doctoral research, I am using traditional oral storytelling to explore whether stories can provide sociological insights into young people’s lives. I am particularly interested in the extent to which stories socialise young people towards socially approved forms of emotional and behavioural expression. The purpose of this article is to offer some preliminary results on an ongoing project. The concept of storytelling as a trigger for sharing conversations was one that emerged during transcription of the data. In the context of the focus group discussions, I define ‘sharing’ as ‘something personal’ that incorporates ‘private life, relationships, and emotions’ (Stevenson, 2010).

I am interested in the way in which young people identify and understand the language of emotion and behaviour in relation to different narrative influences around them. This is called narrative learning: ‘learning from, about and through stories, and learning through reflecting on the experience of narrating and the narrating of experience’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 2007: 645).

I am additionally interested in whether young people are aware of the conformative or subversive effects of narrative influences around them in the form of literature, TV, films, video-games, music, media, education, the internet and interaction with other people like

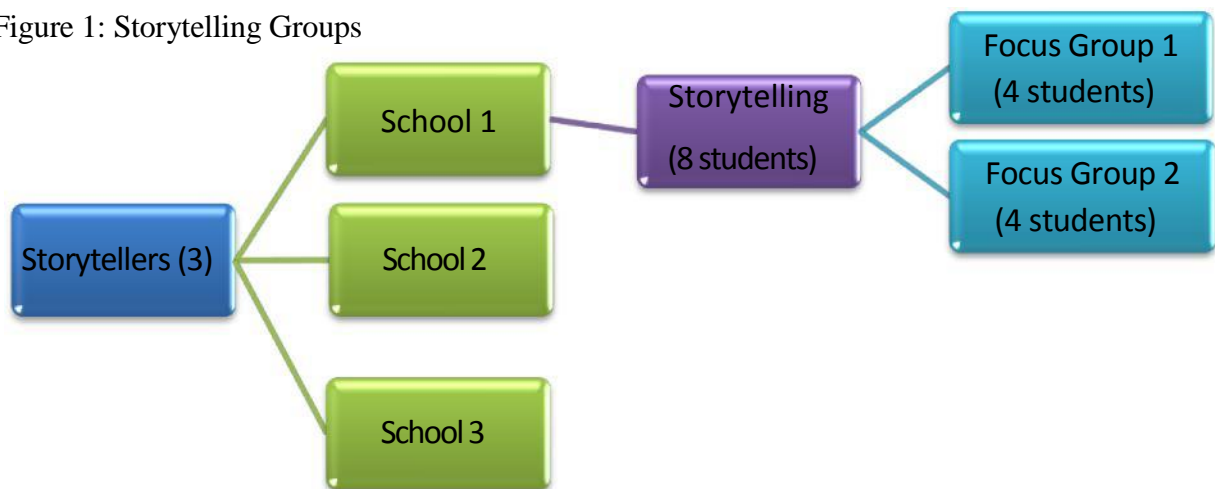
friends and family. In this article, I will elaborate on how the storytelling space I created in my research unexpectedly triggered dialogues of sharing between young people aged 12 to 14 years, which I have since sought to explore in more detail.

Methodology

For five consecutive weeks, I worked with six focus groups in collaboration with three schools in the Warwickshire area. The groups were, as much as possible, of mixed gender, ethnicity, ability, and socio-economic background. I was not able to access as full a range of students as I would have liked. For example, I wanted to balance gender participation but one of the research sites was an all-girls school. I began each focus group with ten to fifteen minutes of traditional storytelling. There were eight students in each storytelling group, which I then divided into groups of four for the focus group discussion (six focus groups of four young people in total, Fig. 1).

My methods and analysis consider a range of contextual variables, which potentially shape the outcomes. These include the stories themselves, the impact of the storytellers, focus group questions, the storytelling space, individual perspectives and interaction amongst the students, the role of the researcher, and wider narratives, which the students are aware of that interact with the groups' process of meaning-making (for instance, literature, TV, films, video-games, music, media, education, and the internet).

Figure 1: Storytelling Groups



I provided three storytellers—English and Theatre Studies students from The University of Warwick—with paper copies of folk tales,¹ which were selected on general themes such as family, love, and transformations, following the results of a pilot study in May 2012. The storytellers were instructed to perform each story as they wished as long as it was from memory. Each of the three schools received the same stories in the same order from week one to week five, which included two contrasting stories in week three. For consistency, the same storyteller returned to each school. However, when Michelle dropped out after week three, her school then received Alex in week four and Miriam in week five (note that the order of the stories remained the same, with the exception of week three in one school where Miriam overlooked the second contrasting story). After the performance, the storyteller left the room so that only the young people and I were present. Each group had a sheet of nine questions to initiate group conversation while I moved between the groups to facilitate this. Overall, I collected fifteen hours of focus group discussion, plus eight hours of initial and final interviews, which I am still in the process of transcribing (Parfitt 2013f).

From experience gained through the pilot project, I expected the students to talk about emotions during their process of meaning-making. The focus group questions were designed to facilitate conversation, which touched on emotions and behaviour without guiding them towards a specific outcome (Appendix 1). The stories' and storytellers' role was primarily aimed at creating a safe space within the school for conversations to occur.

The students had the choice to share what they wished to in the group. I informed each student in the initial interviews that I was interested in their opinions, and that there were no right or wrong responses or viewpoints. At times, I would prompt an individual to elaborate, but with the option to decline to do so if they wished.

As expected, there were differences in the storytellers' performance styles. I hope to illustrate this with some extracts from the *Crescent Moon Bear* (Estés 1992) performed differently in all three schools in week two,

[Alex tells the story in a calm even voice throughout] out of the corner of his eye he sees this young, scared, dewy-eyed, young lady. Obviously his first reaction is one of aggression, he doesn't know what she is doing here, why she came up this mountain, a fight or flight scenario. The first thing the lady does is explain about her husband. She explains how she needs one hair from his throat in order to save their marriage and home

life. The bear didn't know what to think at first, then she took pity on the lady (Parfitt 2013b)

[Michelle uses physical actions, and tone, during her performance] the woman was terrified but she did not move at all, the bear [raises her voice:] roared again it was so loud that it gave her shivers up her spine. But then she was determined to get this white hair from the crescent moon bear. That's why she did not move at all. So when the bear pulled out his claws [raises her hands like claws] as though he was going to grab her—he could crush her, he could eat her—she pleaded, [change of tone:] please Crescent Moon Bear! (Parfitt 2013c)

[Miriam uses word emphasis and change of tone] It looked up, and up, until it was looking right into the eyes of the woman. She was so scared. Her feet were [emphasis:] rooted to the ground and she was trembling, she thought, I [emphasis:] can't run away. I need to get the hair to help my husband. I can't [emphasis:] run away from this bear. The bear looked at her and the bear [emphasis:] roared and she could see right down its throat it was so close. She didn't run away. She [emphasis:] fell to her [emphasis:] knees [tone change:] and pleaded with the bear, please, please Crescent Moon Bear, please help me! (Parfitt 2013d)

These differences in performance style may well have some influence on the students' process of meaning-making. Later analysis will involve some deconstruction of the stories relating to their emotional and behavioural content. This will encompass various layers including: the initial text provided to each storyteller, the storytellers' interpretation and performance of this text, and the students' differing interpretations.

The storytelling sessions occurred in two classrooms and one library. I changed these three spaces by moving the desks aside and pulling chairs towards where the storyteller sat. The aim of this was to separate the storytelling space, as far as possible, from the school system where work is viewed as a process of rewards.

My research is a type of intervention: I am creating a space within the school where the usual rules do not apply regarding behaviour and emotion. These rules are replaced by those of the storytelling space. However, since my research was taking place within the school, I was viewed as a figure of authority. I exercised some authority when conducting the focus groups

but I discovered that the students viewed me as an outsider and were willing to share and discuss things that bothered them about the school in my presence, occasionally checking that no one from the school would hear the recordings, which then reassured them they were safe to do so.

These variables—the stories, the storytellers, focus group questions, storytelling space, individual perspectives and interaction amongst the students, the role of the researcher, and wider narratives, which the students are aware of—work together to shape the process of meaning-making in the focus groups.

A diverse range of fields, including literature, anthropology, education and psychology, informed my use of storytelling as a methodology by demonstrating the importance of narrative and its potential uses. My initial interest came from SunWolf and Frey's work which demonstrated that listening to fairy tales reduced anxiety in college students after 9/11 (2001). I then expanded my reading to include many areas related to storytelling and narratives, like psychology. Bettelheim theorised, through the deconstruction of fairy tales, that stories support positive psychological health outcomes by providing young people with a safe way of fantasising and resolving inner issues as they adapt to their social environment (1976: 66). His work, however, is preoccupied with a male, adult interpretation of fairy tales. I did not find any analysis in the interpretation of these stories from a young person's perspective, which led me to conclude that such ideas, as well as being adult-centric, remained theoretical.

Sarbin's work on the narrative analysis of life histories highlights the importance of an individual's self-narratives in the formation of identity and the benefits of narrative as a tool to explore individual experience, because of the rich psychological insights it uncovers (1986). In addition, Bruner discusses how narratives aid individuals in constructing their reality—as inner reasoning interacts with the social environment. This process of meaning-making and communication is an important aspect of identity formation contributing to debates in psychology and education where interactions between school and the broader society are considered important in the socialisation of young people (1991; 1996; Goodwin 2006).

To explore whether narratives can provide sociological insights into young people's lives, I decided to use stories in the form of storytelling. In communication studies, SunWolf has explored Native American, Sufi, and African storytelling traditions and their functions:

illustrating that exposure to stories benefits individuals as a way of learning. The influence of stories on young people and what is learnt and communicated through story in different ways is therefore important in terms of education (1999: 62). In many traditional Native American cultures, for example, fables are conveyed in place of directly advising someone how to act, because it is the story and the individual's interpretation of it that provides the appropriate moral and behavioural lessons held by the community (SunWolf 1999: 51; 2004). Other research demonstrates that improvements in education and language ability could be linked to narrative exposure (Clark and Rossiter, 2008; Cortazzi and Jin, 2007; Isbell *et al.* 2004).

Listening to and sharing stories (personal or otherwise) has further potential health benefits. There is extensive literature about the positive health effects of narratives, including writing therapy. SunWolf also reflects on listening to storytelling, as well as sharing stories, in the context of the health care system (2005; 2008).

For the purposes of my research, I am interested in what conversations have been triggered by the storytelling space and what other narratives connected to emotion and behaviour that the young people refer to in their conversations. Therefore, I designed the focus groups to create the space to go off topic while as a facilitator I moved between groups giving them a degree of privacy at regular intervals. I left the responsibility to answer the questions to the group whilst occasionally enquiring what they had been discussing in relation to different questions.

That the influence of narratives is recognised in health care research, made me interested in whether stories support emotional and behavioural learning. This influenced my research because I wanted to use a deductive and inductive approach to see first what narratives young people linked to the stories, if any, and what they shared in the groups in terms of emotion and behaviour, which I felt would allow the planning of further research based on what the focus groups revealed.

The Potential Benefits of a Storytelling Space

Although I am in the early stages of research, analysis of my initial findings suggests that the creation of a storytelling space in schools may trigger young people to share information about events and experiences in their personal lives. I decided to examine what prompted or triggered these discussions, which involved looking at the content of the conversations that

preceded sharing. The storytelling performance in week one told the story of *MacCodram*. *MacCodram* is a Scottish story about a group of children who are turned to seals by their step-mother. The nature of the curse allows them to remove their seal skins and dance on the beach one day a year in human form. On one of these occasions, when the children have grown into young men and women, a fisherman steals one of the pelts and makes the woman his wife. Years later his wife finds her pelt and returns to the sea (MacIntyre, 2013). In the following conversation the group had been spontaneously comparing the story they had just heard, *MacCodram*, to Disney's *The Little Mermaid* when I (RES) asked them a question,

RES Yes, you've got a witch who puts a spell on somebody. Why
 do you think witches are always portrayed in that way?

Felicity Cause they're witches

RES In Snow White you've got an evil step-mum

Mary And you've got the witch who gives her the apple

Heidi People always, whenever they've got a step-mum they're
 always seen to be evil

Felicity My step-mum isn't evil! My step-dad is but my step-mum
 isn't

Mary You have a step-dad and a step-mum?

Felicity Well I haven't got a step-dad no more [pause]. He dumped
 me.

(Parfitt 2013a lines. 288-296)

There are three issues to consider when looking at what triggered Felicity to share this information about her step-dad. Firstly, did the person that spoke prior to Felicity (in this case Mary) ask a direct question or impart information that triggered Felicity to share? In this instance, Felicity said 'Well I haven't got a step-dad no more [pause]. He dumped me' in direct response to Mary asking Felicity a question. Therefore, Felicity's statement could be a result of social interaction in response to the storytelling space that has been created by the research.

Secondly, I observed which words Felicity used prior to her comment about no longer having a step-father to see if her use of language might indicate a progression of thought from one idea to the next. The preceding comment Felicity made was ‘My step-mum isn’t evil! My step-dad is but my step-mum isn’t’. Felicity’s words not only link to her sharing statement, but are in direct response to Heidi saying that stories always portray step-mums as ‘evil.’ This could also be classed as social interaction in response to the storytelling and focus group context.

Thirdly, I considered which words might have led to the group discussing step-parents. Heidi, Mary, Olive and Felicity were talking about witches when I joined their conversation. I listened to what they were saying and summarised that in both *The Little Mermaid* and *MacCodram* ‘you’ve got a witch who puts a spell on somebody’. However, I then linked this to Snow White’s step-mum because in the story of *MacCodram*, the sea-witch was also the children’s step-mother. This drew a response from Heidi about step-mother stereotypes and as a result Felicity shared her experience with her step-dad, if only briefly. Although I triggered the conversation by using the words ‘witch’ and ‘step-mum’, I did this in response to what the group was talking about, and the story of *MacCodram* which they had just heard. Since the fairy tales in the study were devised, sociological research has shown a change in the nature of families (Hughes 1991; Suanet *et al.* 2013). The group’s conversation indicates that awareness of previous narrative stereotypes remains.

Looking at another example with the same group, I entered the conversation when the group decided they had finished the focus group questions. I prompted them to return to a question,

RES So what were you talking about, about the characters? Did you relate to one of the characters more than the others?

Mary I guess you could say the children because we’re children, if your mum left you’d be pretty upset. I kind of know how they would have felt

Heidi It’s harsh when parents split up because then they try and make up rumours about each other and then they try to get the child to stay with either one or the other

(Parfitt 2013a lines. 314-319)

First, Mary relates to the children in the story on an emotional level ‘I kind of know how they would have felt’ and this prompts Heidi to share some personal experience. Second, Heidi’s prior comment was unrelated to the sharing conversation, she had previously said, ‘I think that this is probably the best group that we’ve been put in’ (Parfitt 2013a lines. 300-301). Third, my enquiry prompted the conversation but it is worth noting that my question was a rephrasing of focus group question four; what would you do if you were in the same situation as one of the characters? Comparable to the previous example sharing seems to be triggered, in the context of storytelling focus groups, by a combination of social interaction and the story. Talking about the story of *MacCodram* made it possible for the girls to share personal information about their lives.

NVivo Analysis

NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software package, which allows a deep level of analysis on text based research. Once I had established that a detailed analysis of field notes in this way might reveal the processes involved in sharing conversations, I used NVivo to mark all sharing conversations for the all-girls school in weeks one and two (Parfitt, 2013a; 2013b). My selection criteria sought to identify phrases/conversations that contained personal content around the subject of ‘private life, relationships, and emotions’ (Stevenson, 2010).

Using NVivo, I discovered that the majority of ‘sharing’ conversations were preceded by me returning to the group to ask what they had been speaking about, or picking up on something they had just said and asking for someone in the group to elaborate. For example, when the group talked about the fisherman’s motivation for taking the seal skin and hiding it from his wife, I asked ‘Have there been any situations in your life when something like that has happened to you?’ which was a rephrasing of focus group question five; can you relate the plot, characters, images or places to your life in anyway? I found that the students shared on eight occasions in total over the two transcripts, six occasions followed instances where I asked them to elaborate, and the remaining two were preceded by the focus group questions. Social interaction may therefore be the trigger in a storytelling context rather than a list of questions or the storytelling space on its own. If further analysis demonstrates that social interaction causes people to share more, this is where real potential beneficial effects could come from, in terms of the storytelling space. Sharing opinions about the story was one of the

things the students told me they enjoyed and learnt from the most in their final interviews. For example, Olive said, 'It was really good I liked it [...] it's good cause you can listen to everyone else's opinion' (Parfitt, 2013f).

Young people become adults. How they are integrated into, or find ways to challenge, prevailing social rules on behaviour and emotion is crucial to understanding how society is reproduced or transformed. Childhoods are fashioned in a number of diverse ways determined by structural components in society, such as home, education, gender, class, religion, and ethnicity, in addition to relationships. This has potential implications for policymaking since how we understand and classify youth governs young people's rights, such as provision of resources, being acknowledged as equal citizens, as well as protective policies in school, medicine, and social services. It therefore determines rights and participation in society (Mayall 2002: 25-28, 122).

At the outset, I proposed that the storytelling space may trigger sharing conversations. Based on a preliminary assessment of my data, I believe that analysing the transcripts in this way has the potential to show beneficial effects of the storytelling space, in that it may allow students to share and learn from one another via social interaction. This has emerged as an important part in the process of working towards my thesis. I will take this further by completing a similar analysis of the remaining fifteen hours of transcription.

In addition, it allows students to reflect on the influences around them in terms of behaviour and emotion, in a way not currently available in the school curriculum. Furthermore, it provides insights into the conformative and subversive effects of narrative influences surrounding young people.

Acknowledgements

Professor Mick Carpenter and Professor Sarah Moss. The Adam Smith Institute.

Appendix

Focus Group Questions

Please give everyone a chance to speak. Please give detailed examples where possible. For example if you can link a story to your life state how and elaborate on it with additional information.

- Q1 How would you summarise the plot in your own words?
- Q2 What images, things, or events in the story do you like or dislike, and why?
- Q3 What other stories do you remember that you can link to this one?
- Q4 What would you do if you were in the same situation as one of the characters?
- Q5 Can you relate the plot, characters, images or places to your life in anyway?
- Q6 What is this story trying to say? What do you take from it?
- Q7 How do you feel about the story? Or how does the story make you feel?
- Q5 What conformance/nonconformance elements are there in the story?
- Q6 Now you've had experience of traditional storytelling how does it differ from having a story read? Do you prefer a story to be read or told, and why?

Endnotes

'The fairy tales were; 'MacCodram and His Wife' (MacIntyre); 'The Crescent Moon Bear' (Estés 1992); 'The Frog King or Iron Henrich' (Grimm and Grimm: 1975); 'She-Bear' (Bastile1893); 'The Rooted Lover' (Housman: 1987); 'The Toy Princess' (De Morgan 1987).

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