Enhancing Postgraduate Taught Students' Engagement

A Storytelling Pedagogical Approach in Higher Education

Yiduo Wang

PhD candidate and Senior GTA, WMG, University of Warwick
Correspondence: Yiduo.Wang@warwick.ac.uk

Yiduo Wang is a PhD researcher from the Warwick Manufacturing Group. Her research is to investigate the effect of STEM outreach on secondary students' attitudes towards STEM funded by the Lord Bhattacharyya Family Trust and in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Engineering. Since December 2020, Yiduo has been working as a graduate teaching assistant for the module of Study, professional and analytical skills (SPA) to provide academic support for more than 1,000 WMG master students, including delivering seminars, running one-to-one mentor sessions, designing synchronous and asynchronous learning materials, and refining online Moodle platform. Yiduo holds an Associate Fellowship from the Higher Education Academy.

Zhizhuo Su

PhD candidate and Senior GTA, Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG), University of Warwick
Correspondence: Zhizhuo.Su@warwick.ac.uk

Zhizhuo Su is a second-year PhD student from the Intelligent Vehicle, WMG, University of Warwick, UK. He has received a bachelor's degree in Vehicle Engineering from Jilin University, China, and a master's degree in Vehicle Engineering from Chongqing University, China. As a senior graduate teaching assistant, he hosted academic writing seminars, weekly drop-in mentoring sessions and designed synchronous and asynchronous curriculum (e.g., face-to-face tutorials and recorded video sessions) in the WMG module of Study, professional and analytical skills (SPA) for over 1000 postgraduate students. He is now focusing on the Analytical Stream of SPA and supporting students' analytical skills with quantitative and qualitative methods. He holds an Associate Fellowship from the Advance HE (previous Higher Education Academy).

Di Wang

PhD candidate and Senior GTA, WMG, University of Warwick
Correspondence: Di.Wang.1@warwick.ac.uk

Di Wang is a PhD researcher and belongs to the Energy Application Group of Warwick Manufacturing Group. His main research field is cell instrumentation, which provides technical support for the development and monitoring of a new generation of smart batteries. Di Wang has been working as a postgraduate teaching assistant for the Study, Professional and Analytical Skills (SPA) module since December 2020. He currently provides teaching support in qualitative and quantitative analysis to the SPA team, and provides diverse academic services to more than 1,000 WMG master students, including online and offline seminars or lectures, one-on-one offline tutoring for targeted students, development of synchronous and asynchronous learning materials to fully meet students' learning needs, etc. He also provided technical support for the upgrade and improvement of the SPA's online Moodle platform.

Abstract

Postgraduate Taught Students are a significant part of our student community. To enhance their learning experience and facilitate their learning more efficiently, a storytelling pedagogical approach conducted by postgraduate teaching assistants (GTAs) could be a way to accelerate this process. Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are important members of the Higher Education teaching community as they provide a unique perspective, from both students and teaching staff. Some of them have a fresh memory of their learning experiences and thus could better understand the students' concerns. This paper reports the experience of PGRs and GTAs regarding sharing personal stories to help students understand and overcome their challenges in academic writing. The storytelling pedagogy in practice indicates a significant effect in supporting not only academic study but also students' engagement and reflection. The usage of storytelling pedagogy also aids in the concept explanation of technical elements in texts by offering succinct and tangible instances, which assist students in developing their critical thinking skills and individualised understanding of factual material.

Keywords: Storytelling Pedagogy, Postgraduate Taught Students, Students' Engagement, Reflection, Constructivism

Background

People tell stories, and people are storytellers. We use stories to convey information, impart knowledge, and inspire creativity (Garcia & Rossiter, 2010). People story their events in order to give them significance and make sense of their lives by employing their acts and the sequences of the events

(Irwin, 1996). When utilised wisely and effectively, storytelling can be a promising pedagogical strategy in higher education. As GTAs, we have the unique strength of dual identity as teachers and students (Wald & Harland, 2020). Since December 2020, we as GTAs have been experiencing the learning journey of students together and witnessing them from different cohort facing challenges and making achievements. Our experiences and students' experiences can be the story materials, act as pedagogical forces and work together to support student learning through academic endeavours.

The Study, Professional and Analytical Skills (SPA) module aims to provide more than 1,000 Taught master's students with academic support and personal development opportunities, to ensure academic integrity and contribute to students' success in their master's learning journey. This module is compulsory with credits to fit with the departments' situation, especially since there is an increased percentage of international students, and some of them may never have academic writing experience before, therefore struggling with the assessment that mainly constitutes essay writing. As GTAs, we hosted academic writing seminars, and weekly drop-in mentoring sessions and designed synchronous and asynchronous learning materials. To engage students, we start with story-sharing about personal experiences in academic writing to naturally build links to the teaching content in the academic writing seminar. The storytelling here is not only limited to teachers sharing their personal experiences and sharing others' stories that teachers prepared. It could also be the situation where teachers ask students to share their stories with each other. This reflective paper will begin with the theoretical basis of storytelling pedagogy, followed by an analysis of how storytelling engages students and facilitates them to be reflective through critical thinking in order to show the value and potency of "storytelling" as a teaching strategy. Common challenges, such as ethical concerns and lacking objectivity are also discussed with possible solutions to encourage the PGR community to increase the use of storytelling as a pedagogy in teaching.

Constructivism as the theoretical basis

The theoretical basis of storytelling pedagogy is constructivism, emphasising that education must be regarded as a constant reconstruction of experience. Narrative storytelling is the mechanism through which learners make sense of their experiences and educational information to constructivism's notion of highlighting experience in learning (McKillop, 2005). Learners require opportunities to actively engage with the information based on their lived experience, and educational content should relate to their prior experience (Garcia & Rossiter, 2010). We should promote an environment where knowledge is not delivered from a single dominating viewpoint and where reflection, discussion, and alternative viewpoints can be incorporated into the process. Students are thus encouraged to learn via experiences that are shared in stories, observe things from various angles, converse with teachers and their peers, and as a result, continuously form their perspective of the world in light of these experiences.

Storytelling enhances students' engagement

Researchers claim that storytelling may successfully assist our student's engagement and learning (Fawcett & Fawcett, 2011; Keehn, 2015; Landrum *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, stories serve to (1) attract attention, (2) give students a

framework for teaching material, (3) present knowledge in an approachable way, and (4) forge a closer bond between students and teachers (Landrum *et al.*, 2019). In other words, stories make information more relatable to us, which aids in learning.

As part of the module, we designed a seminar on research ethics related to human participants. There are three key points we wish to convey to students: informed consent, privacy and confidentiality and risk and disclosure. These concepts are ponderous and abstract to some degree, but essential for WMG Master students to understand and apply in their post-module assignments and dissertation. Therefore, we shared our research story with students to attract their attention and lay the foundation for the following concept delivery.

For example, I picked up a scenario where interviewees asked whether they could return their consent forms after the online interview since they forgot to sign the digital consent form that I sent before the interview. We processed and distilled our experience to focus on the situation that directly related to teaching content. This story held students' interest while delivering important curriculum-related information since students behaved actively but varied: some students thought the interviewee's request was reasonable and can be agreed upon, but some are not thereby heated discussions ensued. Students with different views felt interested in whether I agree or disagree, and how I dealt with this situation. I highlighted to students that informed consent should be obtained before the interview rather than after the interview. Considering my participants forgot to sign, I read the consent form to them and obtained verbal consent and asked the interviewee to return the digital consent form immediately after the interview, rather than waiting for my

interviewees to read, sign, edit and send forms back which may waste interview time.

In this way, the knowledge is delivered in an approachable way since stories encourage perspective-taking and an empathic reaction. Students can get both cognitive understanding and affective reaction through accessing others' experiences in the story (Gallagher, 2011; Garcia & Rossiter, 2010). This resonated with both students and us as teachers since the research ethical issues within the teaching content are directly relevant to our current research, and the student's future research, therefore contributing to close the relationship between students and teachers.

Additionally, this scenario is naturally and smoothly linked with the concept of informed consent, providing students with a framework for teaching material. The universality of storytelling makes it simpler for students to memorise the information presented in a narrative structure (Landrum *et al.*, 2019). The topic and key details of the story are simple to recall because of the narrative's careful construction, and stories are a powerful tool to illustrate the subject and emphasise certain themes. When students think about the concept of informed consent, we hope that they can utilise stories as a starting point for research both within and outside of my classroom.

Reflective nature of the storytelling model

Despite its less frequent use in the process, storytelling can be employed as a powerful reflection technique in higher education. McKillop (2005) suggested a storytelling model that contains four kinds of responses that students have to actively participate in and think critically about the stories: viewpoint response, wonder if

response, similar story response, and what learnt response, as Figure 1 shows. The students' attempt to comprehend prior behaviours and improve upon them while acknowledging the challenges they are having in doing so shows a deep level of reflective capacity that is necessary to be self-reliant, organised learners (McKillop, 2005).

Another example shared as part of this seminar was a story from a past student, who planned to add a monetary award to attract participants but without getting the ethical approval of using financial incentives.

After the story, students can learn from experiencing a different point of view and gain an understanding of other people's worldviews by taking into account numerous perspectives, to form different "viewpoint" responses such as understanding or agreement/disagreement. Following the viewpoint response, they may have a "wonder if" response that allows for various outcomes to be explored and can then be taken into consideration in their research ethics practice, such as "I wonder if this guy can use different ways to recruit participants, such as invitation emails which has fewer risks" or " I wonder if this student will have the risk of failing the dissertation owing to not following the ethical approval".

Additionally, they may also have a "similar" response that enables students to describe a related experience, forging a connection and fostering empathy, like "Oh yes, that happened to me. I plan to do the same but do not know whether it is appropriate". I explained the possible result of failing in the dissertation that the student in the story may face, as well as the reasons why it leads to ethical research. This inspires the "what learned" response that invites students to reflect on the lessons they have taken away from the story. Except for the serious result, the financial incentives

are usually seldom to be reimbursed for master's students, adding the difficulties for obtaining ethical approval, and may hurt the research quality by the biased recruitment. Therefore, students have learned and even adjusted their strategies by thoughtfully reflecting on what they've learned.

Challenges in the application of storytelling

From our personal teaching experience, the use of storytelling as pedagogy is not without risks and challenges. Firstly, stories lack objectivity since the storyteller shares the lived experiences from a personal perspective. However, this lack of objectivity does not need to be a hindrance. Stories frequently stick in the listener's mind longer than structured teaching content because they are given with emotion by the storyteller and resonate emotionally with students (McKillop, 2005). Even so, out of caution as a GTA, the presentation of stories must be as neutral as possible, with a focus on merely providing the facts and our interpretations of those facts. The specific circumstance will never be the same; what the teachers can do is provide the space and flexibility to allow students to interpret the meanings behind the stories by themselves.

Secondly, the stories will be linked to the teaching content finally after achieving the aims of improving engagement and facilitating reflection, which means the story should be well designed and fitted with the teaching content. In this way, the complexity and indirect nature of stories require the deliverer to be extraordinarily prepared, going above and beyond the teaching material, and able to quickly adapt to the needs of students to ensure that neither the story nor the information it conveys is lost.
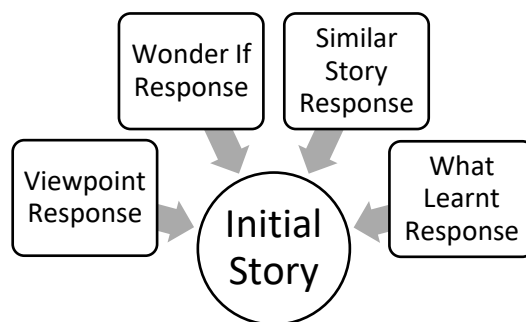
Figure 1: Four kinds of responses to the initial story. Source: McKillop (2005)

Thirdly, a delicate balance exists between sharing personal experiences and respecting ethical boundaries and confidentiality concerns. This issue becomes more acute, especially when asking students to share their experiences or for me as a teacher to share stories of my past students. According to Boud & Walker (1998), the student has to be allowed to express themselves freely in a welcoming and safe setting without fear of repercussions. In our seminar settings, this safe environment can be in a classroom with a smaller group size of students or online sessions without video recordings. Additionally, sharing must be done in a situation that has no negative outcomes (Landrum *et al.*, 2019). Students need to know they can trust the teachers. This trust can be built through well-designed ice-breaker activities or interactions with students in prior classes. In order to ensure this safe environment is still ensured when interacting online, students could remain anonymous by sharing stories with their initials, or a nickname/username to keep them anonymous, rather than their name.

Conclusion

Experiences and stories are what constitute knowledge. Stories can serve as a vehicle for teaching; however, Higher Education teachers may underappreciate the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogy. This reflective paper illustrates constructivism as the theoretical foundation of storytelling pedagogy and discusses the potential of GTAs using storytelling as a teaching tool to share personal experiences to enhance students' engagement and promote their reflective learning. According to students' feedback and our experience, storytelling effectively engages students since the stories sharing inspires students' interest, helps students understand the knowledge in an approachable way and improves teacher-student relationships. Additionally, storytelling is suggested as an interesting and complementary strategy for improving reflective thinking skills. Approaches trying to encourage higher cognitive thinking skills, such as reflection, should be anchored in a pedagogical paradigm. This paper suggests using these stories as the starting point for reflective dialogues. We also give the warning that personal storytelling is still a contentious teaching strategy in higher education. Its objectivity, relevance to the teaching content, and potential ethical concerns are all called into doubt by critics. Considering these issues, tips and guidelines for using storytelling as a teaching strategy are provided, to encourage the PGR community to utilise storytelling in their teaching practice.

References

Boud, D. & Walker, D. (1998) Promoting reflection in professional courses: The challenge of context. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23 (2): 191-206.

Fawcett, S. E. & Fawcett, A. M. (2011) The "living" case: Structuring storytelling to increase student interest, interaction, and learning. *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 9 (2): 287-298.

Gallagher, K. M. (2011) In search of a theoretical basis for storytelling in education research: Story as method. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 34 (1): 49-61.

Garcia, P. & Rossiter, M. (2010) *Digital storytelling as narrative pedagogy*. Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference. Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 1091-1097.

Irwin, R. R. (1996) Narrative competence and constructive developmental theory: A proposal for rewriting the bildungsroman in the postmodern world. *Journal of Adult Development*, 3 (2): 109-125.

Keehn, M. G. (2015) "When you tell a personal story, I kind of perk up a little bit more": An examination of student learning from listening to personal stories in two social diversity courses. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 48 (3): 373-391.

Landrum, R. E., Brakke, K. & McCarthy, M. A. (2019) The pedagogical power of storytelling. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 5 (3): 247-253.

McKillop, C. (2005) *Storytelling grows up: using storytelling as a reflective tool in higher education*. IN: Scottish Educational Research Association Conference, Perth, Scotland, 24–26 November.

Wald, N. & Harland, T. (2020) Rethinking the teaching roles and assessment responsibilities of student teaching assistants. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44 (1): 43-53.