Narrative as a Teaching Strategy

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Abstract
Research shows that those who are incarcerated, as a whole, have come from difficult past environments. This leads to having a different way of learning than most others who have had successful educational experiences. Because of this, my research project focused on exploring storytelling/narrative, as a teaching strategy, and how it influences adult learning in a correctional facility. Three methods of research were used. As the first method, a formal literature review was prepared to obtain background information on storytelling, including past history and current use. Second, Wisconsin Department of Corrections professionals were interviewed to explore their teaching strategies and use of storytelling with offenders. The final element was a personal observation journal. In analyzing the data given, three themes emerged. These included connection between teacher and student, validation of student experience and student perspective. Connection between teacher and student was seen in the relationship between student and teacher in the classroom. Validation of student experience was shown in developing empathy for self and others and being able to see how past behavior influences present circumstances. Student perspective included learning to broaden and challenge the student's current perspective, issues related to changing thinking patterns, and approaches that involve reflection.

Introduction

"In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it. . . The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.

Walter Benjamin
Illuminations (p 89)
The aspiration and purpose to carry out this project on narrative began because of personal use of narrative with students within the Department of Corrections. It seemed important to employ new strategies to teach life skills, different ways of coping with life situations, and problem-solving. It was also of utmost importance to assist students in applying the skills they were learning into practical daily life. Based on prior research on the power of narrative in adult learning; storytelling showed to be a valuable teaching method in portraying daily life situations and how to deal with them. The objective was to provide information of the possible benefits of narrative, as a teaching strategy, specifically within the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. The goal was to examine this subject and make clear connections to Department of Corrections educators, that by implementing a new strategy of storytelling into the present curriculum, it would assist in developing a larger scope of influence in student learning. Hence, students may be better equipped to deal with daily life and problem solving.

It was discussed with other staff, including teachers, social workers and parole agents, whether they used narrative as a teaching method with students and clients. The majority said they did use narrative, in one way or another. A few thought about using this approach, but were not sure about its value. Several felt it took too long to apply narrative into their teaching situations. However, those who did take the time to use narrative found it an extremely valuable tool.

Context
The learners were incarcerated young men, ages 17-40. They were charged with a first felony drug offense. Most have reading levels from the 1st grade level through the 9th grade. When periodically questioned about whether they were read stories by their parents when younger, there was a resounding “no”. Some students had children and stated they would love to be able to read to their children. During class times, when stories were read to them and followed by group discussions about the story, the characters, what was said, and how the story applied to their lives, students stated they loved it and were able to discuss new ways of looking at life.

There are 19 adult correctional facilities in the State of Wisconsin and six youth facilities and programs. Fifteen of the nineteen adult facilities are medium or minimum security. In Wisconsin, it has been experienced that the Department of Corrections is committed to the education of offenders. There appears to be openness to new ideas and an open door to develop fresh, innovative and creative ways to present education and use new teaching strategies.
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Research goals were to expand knowledge of the use of narrative as a teaching strategy in literacy curriculum, within the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

The Importance and Role of Narrative
Scholars agree that storytelling creates a learning situation. It allows our minds to think outside the box of our own experiences and to develop creative ways to problem-solve. It also allows us to identify with the theme and character of the story and to see their way of thinking. Through this process, one’s own errors in thinking tend to be realized. A number of professionals have linked storytelling as being relevant to learning, adult education and the incarcerated population.

Sample
The research sample was taken from teachers, social workers, parole agents and other professional staff, felt to be in a position to use storytelling as a teaching method, within the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. The sample size was ten participants.

Ethics
The participants were all adults and willing to participate, as volunteers, in this research project and formal signed informal consent was obtained.

Research Methodology
The three elements used to evaluate how narrative/storytelling, as a teaching strategy, influences adult learning in a correctional facility were: formal literature review, interviews with other practitioner’s in the field of Corrections, and a personal observation journal.

Research Findings
Formal Literature review
The first method of data gathering was research. Research was done in the following areas: experts in the educational field; those who were actively involved using narrative/storytelling within correctional facilities; theorists and; the theory of constructivism. Three themes were identified: definition of narrative, social and personal effects of narrative, and influencing self-efficacy.
**Definition of Narrative - Scholarship**

Jerome Brunner states in his book *Making Stories* (2002) states that "stories impose a structure, a compelling reality on what we experience, even a philosophical stance" (p 89). He also states that "we should not write off this power of story to shape everyday experience as simply another error in our human effort to make sense of the world, though cognitive scientists are sometimes won't to do this" (p 8).

Steve Denning in his article, "What is a Story? What is narrative meaning? Definitions" (http://www.stevedenning/com/What_story/html) defines narrative as having meaning and its connections, linking human actions and event into multi-related events, displaying the significance that events have on one another.

Wendy Elyatt, in her article ‘Action Guide: Storytelling and the Power of Narrative’ (2002) states it that storytelling/narrative is usually combined with human actions or events that affect human beings. The meaning of each event is produced by the part it plays in the whole episode”.

Clandinin and Connelly state in their book *Narrative Inquiry* (2000) that narrative becomes a way of understanding experience. With narrative as our vantage point we have a point of reference, a life and a ground to stand on for imagining what experience is. Experience is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of these stories reaffirm them, modify them and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young. (p xxvi).

S. Falter, states the following:

Think of stories as the clothesline of your mind. You stub your toe. You tell yourself a ‘poor me’ story and hang it on the clothesline next to the fender bender that week and that broken nose in 10th grade. You have these myth clotheslines for relationships, work and money. A great deal of current work is being done in psychology on personal narrative – the stories we tell ourselves. If you have a healthy personal narrative, then you have a better chance of having a better attitude about life. *(Story Maven, p 2)*

R. Ganzel (1999) in his article “Telling Stories” states:

....Stories help us make sense of the world and give structure and order to our everyday lives. They tell us what is important, and what is not, and
give us a way to connect people's individual experiences to those of others, as well as to universal truths. Indeed, stories are yet another way we put a human face on the world, which is something we have always needed and valued, whether we admit it or not" (p 36).

Walter Fisher, in his book *Human Communication as Narrative* (1987), discusses this subject. In summary of his thoughts and ideas he defines narrative as not merely fictional stories, but any verbal or nonverbal account that has a sequence of events to which listeners assign meaning. He believes there are five aspects of narrative. First, the story is a tale of values. Second, these values are appropriate for the moral of the story and decisions made by the characters. Third, the values are perceived to have positive results in the lives of people. Fourth, the value is consistent with one's own experience. Finally, the value/s are part of an ideal vision for human conduct. Stories are universal, thereby narrative is liberating and empowering.

It was said that narrative and life go together and that the principal attraction of narrative is its capacity to render life experiences, both social and personal, in relevant and meaningful ways. Livo and Rietz, in their book *Storytelling, Process and Practice* (1986) state that

... storytelling connects the disconnections of human experience and gives something whole and meaningful to it. Storytelling is a vehicle for binding one together with the past, present and future ... inside stories we can accept pain, find justice and experience elation ... It connects the disconnections of human experience and gives something whole and meaningful to it ... We join others emotionally and intellectually and develop a sense of rightness and belonging ... Stories also offer us insight and understanding into ourselves" (p 5).

They also stated, "the ability to put self, personal experiences, and personal information into "story" may be critical to psychological well-being" (p 6). Adults who do not see the importance of storying their lives are people who have lost the ability to story their experiences -- to see themselves in a more universal perspective and to invest their doings with a greater sensibility and coherence. Such individuals require "restorying" in order to bring their sense of self, place and time into better balance (p 6).

Several scholars worked or taught with those who are incarcerated. Fox (2001) stated that people learn from the world and she believes that storytelling
is powerful and has tremendous educational benefits. Lamb (2003) states that the telling and writing of stories allows the discovery of the intertwined power of the written word and the power that resides within the individual. Glasgow (1994) states, according to Brookfield’s learning theory, a non-threatening, meaningful and sensitive learning environment needs to be created for people to learn, and stories create this type of atmosphere. The Write One Speaker’s Bureau (2004) states that storytelling is an unsurpassed tool for learning about ourselves and about the thoughts and feelings of others. Hopwood (1999), states that all stories contain truth and being able to understand one’s self and others, why one did something and what affects it has on the whole person, can be seen through stories. When one is able to process this information and assess it, there is a greater chance of not repeating mistakes. This, in turn, affects a person’s self-esteem.

Hopwood (1999) states on the back of his book, Free with Words, “Prison does not have to be simply a place to deposit criminals. It can also be a foundation for prisoners’ future lives . . . and writers show how exploration of the written and spoken word can provide a gateway to change”. He believes that traditional tales abound with people on the edge of the law, sometimes with both feet over the line (p 65). He gives the example of Jack and the Beanstalk, which features a serial burglar and murderer as a hero. He states that many of the heroes of folk tale and legend are criminals; even more are underdogs who rise up to beat the system. This theme appeals to those who are incarcerated, whose world is a microcosm of the empowered and the powerless. As he stated, “stories give us hope” (p 76). Storytelling is truly without boundaries, it excludes no one. He says that one does not have to be educated to be able to read or write or to join in. In the prison work of boredom, routine, and repetition, stories offer an adventure into the imagination, the opportunity to forget where one is, and a chance to laugh and play (p 77). He goes on to say that through story we learn about other people, other places and times, but crucially we learn lessons about being human. Story enriches and compliments our own experience. Story teaches us about the opportunities, the consequences of action, the alternatives and the choices in life. Story makes us complete as human beings (p 77). His philosophy is that if we can make storytelling a part of our lives and the way we look at the world, we can learn reflection, how to reinvent ourselves, how to rehearse new futures. Our own lives are rich with stories and are unique. Not only this, but it develops our listening and telling skills. We gain insight into other’s lives as we share stories.
and communicate. His belief is that stories can change the world; not all on their own perhaps, and not all at once. But most certainly they can change lives (p 81).

Wally Lamb (2003), in his book *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* talks about the contributors of the book. He says, "each contributor whose work you will read has discovered the intertwined power of the written word and the power that resides within her" (p 16). He talks about how the women’s writing and demeanor changed over time. He says that through writing their personal stories, they experienced a sense of release. They were able to deal with their lives with reality. They were emotionally released from past trauma and hurt.

**Theorists**

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) theory is important in the role of narrative because many of those who are incarcerated have experienced severe breakdowns in their environments. Telling stories reaches down into a person’s life in areas that may not have ever been touched and may give them a different view of their life circumstances. He believes if one is to grow and change, it is imperative that one begin to understand where they have been and how circumstances have affected them in the present.

Bruner (2002) states that all of life is a story. Stories help us put the pieces of our experiences together.

Erikson's (1950) stresses how human behaviors and traits have evolved over time as a person adapts to their environment. This is important because of how one develops over time, and behaviors shown in the past (or in role models) affects one’s outlook on life and problem-solving in the future.

Gardner (*Frames of Mind*, 1983) called his technique the "mutual storytelling technique" (Pellowski, p 121). During a therapy session, the child is asked to tell a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. The stories are tape recorded and played back. The playback is the important section. The therapist reiterates the story, using the same theme, but concluding with a lesson or moral attached.

The theory of constructivism teaches that learning is mental and involves language. One does not learn isolated facts and theories separate from one’s lives and experiences. People learn in relationship to what they know, what they believe, their fears and prejudices. Stories can open new doors of thinking. Stories can help people relate past experiences with present ones. Stories can prepare for future events in our lives. Stories can lead to "deep thinking" and how to apply and process new information about oneself. Stories open many doors.
Interviews
The second method of data gathering was interviews. A series of eight questions were asked. The interviews were evaluated on the three common themes found in each question.

In analyzing the data given in the interviews, three themes emerged. They were:

- Connection between teacher and student
- Validates of student experience
- Student perspective

Connection between teacher and student
The interviewees stated that using stories is a better way to convey their point or the meaning of what they are trying to teach. They stated that stories afford a more interesting way of getting students information and stories allow the teacher to have something to talk about with the student.

They also made the following statements:

- Stories also show students that we all have similar life experiences.
- Stories promote growth and trust between teacher and student, building rapport.
- Stories are an excellent group dynamic, bringing people together.
- It was also stated that stories keep the classroom lively for the teacher — when there is laughter, then the students are engaged in learning.
- Stories also expose students to literature and teach vocabulary.

There are several important factors in making connections. Connections between teacher and student bond the two together. It makes teaching fun. Storytelling is not the ordinary way of teaching and it provides another dimension to what the teacher is trying to have the students understand. It can also be a strong tool to help the student understand the information being presented.

Sometimes the connection is broken between teacher and student because there is a failure to read the audience or using stories in the wrong setting with the wrong people. Storytelling also takes a lot of time and it may be perceived as being weak because it does not follow the curriculum or the standard way of teaching.

Some of the statements made were that storytelling takes the students out of a traditional form of teaching. Stories make learning more fun and often get the students more motivated. They also get excited about learning and practical
applications. It was stated that storytelling is an extremely effective teaching strategy if the teachers know what they are doing.

**Validates Student Experience**

The interviewees stated that:

Stories give students a voice and allow expression. They allow the student to act out the story with voices and faces, creating an ownership of the story. Stories are beneficial in relation to what is going on in their lives.

Stories validate student’s experiences, particularly in adult education. Stories allow students to take ownership of their behavior, actions and thoughts. The use of stories allows change and growth to occur. Storytelling also allows students to be creative and see that creativity has no limits.

Stories often times have “gray areas”. Students tend to think everything is either black or white. The gray areas can be discussed to assist the student to consider different alternatives to problems and situations. Telling personal stories helps students look at life and problems objectively. Stories also allow the student to see that emotions are not good or bad and this allows them to try to look at a situation/life/experience objectively and out of the realm of what is going on around them.

Students may be reluctant to open up about past experiences because of past treatment by others. They may also be fearful of what the teacher may do with the information they reveal. There may be problems in writing about the story because the student has literacy, spelling and vocabulary problems. This can be very disconcerting to a person who has failed these areas in the past, because of poor educational experiences.

Repetition is an excellent tool for student learning. One participant said that repetition is needed to help students see things from another perspective – to see from the outside and not from the inside, and what the consequences are. Stories can do that. Stories can make students curious about something, and if they are curious, they may do follow-up on it.

**Student Perspective**

The interviewees also stated the following about student perspective:

Stories allow for development of critical thinking. Stories help build moral development and enhance verbal communication. Stories also enhance interpersonal communication. Stories allow the student to look at life from different angles. Stories engage the mind and allow for development of critical thinking.

One participant summed it up this way: “Stories allow the student to look
at a problem differently. Stories offer a chance for the student to see how things could have been better or worse. Stories offer no right or wrong answers. Stories offer an opportunity to look at a way of processing things, so when similar situations offer themselves, they will be able to process it in a better fashion. Stories provide a down-to-earth method of teaching lessons which might be foreign to the student.

The use of storytelling allows teachers to hear what is going on in their students' lives and it also allows the students to look at situations from another perspective. It exposes students to different worlds. Stories activate background knowledge and because of this, students are more likely to process information and better remember it. Stories make situations real. They may invoke emotion, which is proven to help people better learn and retain information.

Stories make learning fun. They help students put themselves in someone else's shoes and assist them to see solutions and alternatives where past thinking patterns offered no alternatives. Also, stories are less abstract and can be very powerful for looking at problems from other viewpoints. Stories about others show how others were able to overcome barriers and eventually succeed, and they promote critical thinking. Even though it might be challenging, stories promote thinking "outside of the box" which is an enormous factor in the learning process.

Students must be ready for what comes up in discussions and be able to process information. Students may have difficulties processing information and may have the inability to expand their minds and their learning. Also, students may be unable to see what is right in front of them and not see the hidden message of the story – they may focus on the wrong thing. There also needs to be a willingness to learn.

Stories can help students apply concepts to their lives. It is important for students to see things from a different perspective. They may then be able to see that their behavior and actions had an impact they did not see before. Stories allow students to reach inside of themselves, let their hair down and be kids. There are often implicit morals to stories. Stories expose students to different ideas and values.

One participant summarized all the comments made, as follows: "I definitely believe storytelling is a valuable teaching strategy because it helps students in applying concepts to their lives. Storytelling also takes the students out of a traditional form of teaching. Many of my students did not succeed in the public school system and have been turned off by traditional teaching methods. They also are quite adept at tuning out authority figures who are
trying to teach or guide them. Storytelling is more interesting and less boring to my students. It definitely piques their interest."

**Personal Journal**

There was a common thread of lessons learned over a three month period of journaling. These included observations of student and observations of the instructor.

**Observations of students**

In analyzing the data, several themes became apparent. The first theme was that the students needed to take time to bond and build trust with each other before opening up. Once this was achieved, rapport was built, and in fact continued to build throughout the six week sessions. Social skills improved, such as listening, being respectful of someone else’s ideas, and how to relate to others. The students also came to realize that although a story may not apply to their lives at the moment, what they were learning from the story might help them in the future.

The next theme observed was that the students were able to acknowledge that they needed others to help them along in life, and that with another’s help, they would be able to persevere through life and not give up. They felt they would be able to better face future challenges and not be afraid to tackle an area of life they had not experienced in the past.

The students also began to see how important the role of self-talk played in their lives.

They began to encourage each other and challenge each other’s thinking. Finally, each student’s writing skills improved over the six week time period.

**Observations of instructor**

Several themes presented themselves. The first theme was a realization that knowledge of the student’s background was necessary. Thought must be given to the students' background and whether they are ready to begin dealing with issues that may be new for them.

Lessons were learned that the instructor’s view and vision was limited on what the student’s could and would learn. There was more change observed in the students than anticipated. For example, the students learned social skills from storytelling. It was also observed how deeply the students were able to think, once they put their minds to it.

Another observation was how much encouragement plays a role in
helping the students work through those thinking patterns that are difficult for them. It was surprising to see the results of what simple words of encouragement can bring to a person’s life.

Finally, it was learned how to develop curriculum that is based on the students in each given class and not just a blanket curriculum for each story. Being flexible played a big role. Lessons were learned in how to let the class times flow and see what happened and where the discussion went.

Conclusion

Storytelling validates student experience, particularly in adult education. Stories are beneficial in relation to what is going on in the students’ lives. They allow students to take ownership of their behavior, actions and thoughts. Stories allow change and growth. Stories often times have “gray areas”. The gray areas can be discussed to assist the student to consider different alternatives to problems and situations. Also, repetition is an excellent tool for student learning.

Stories can change a student’s perspective. There are often implicit morals to stories. They are less abstract and can be very powerful at looking at problems from other viewpoints. Even though it might be challenging, stories promote thinking “outside of the box”, which is an enormous factor in the learning process. Stories allow for development of critical thinking. Stories may help build moral development and enhance verbal communication. Stories may also enhance interpersonal communication. They expose students to different worlds. They can make situations real. They may invoke emotion, which is proven by students in helping a person learn and retain information better. Stories may also help students apply concepts to their lives. Stories can make learning fun – allowing students to reach inside of themselves, let their hair down and be kids.

Inquiry into the effectiveness of storytelling, in adult learning within the Department of Corrections, appears to show that it is a creative and valuable teaching strategy. The main lesson learned in this research project is that storytelling is a valuable method of teaching others about life, whether children or adults. It enhances discovery of self and others.

As a parting thought to ponder and consider: Psst! There’s nothing in this life that isn’t a story.

References

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Biographical Sketch

**SUSAN BUTCHER** earned her Master's Degree in Adult Education from Alverno College in December, 2002. She is a prison educator and guidance counselor at the Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility. In the past, her work has included working with troubled teens and adults, both in education and counseling. She is also a part-time instructor at Alverno College.