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Stories as Instructional Strategy: Teaching in Another Culture

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Stories as Instructional Strategy: Teaching in Another Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with a story. It all began in September 1992. I had just walked into a classroom at the Chinese University of Hong Kong to begin my first international teaching experience. Perhaps more than any other time since I'd moved to Hong Kong, I knew I was no longer in Illinois! A sea of Chinese faces watched me walk into the classroom. I was unsure about their English proficiency, and I spoke enough Mandarin to fill a thimble, and even less Cantonese. Here I was, the teacher of the basic oral communication course, "Effective Oral Communication." There they were, staring at me. My heart sank. I asked myself, and meant it with all my being, "What am I doing here?" Everything I'd learned about teaching in the past 25 years seemed useless. I was indeed a stranger in a strange land. My environment, my academic discipline, my sense of self were all strangers to me.

Shabatay's (1991) description of the stranger came to mind:

A member of a group lives at ease with his habits, with the ways of his group. But the stranger must be always on the alert; he must struggle to learn the different ways; the idioms of the language, the idioms of emotion, the meaning
of unspoken glances. He has to learn the history, possibly the language, certainly the customs and traditions of his adopted community. His antennae are always out: Who may expel me? Who may be threatened by me? Who may be suspicious of my loyalty? Did I commit a faux pas? Whom did I insult? The stranger must learn how to blend, to belong, to be beyond mistrust. He must live through the uncomfortableness of awkwardness, of ignorance, of his "greenhornness." He must gain acceptance, and then he must live with the tension of his two cultures: new and old.

After a disastrous first class period, I returned to my office, closed the door, sat down, and asked myself, "How can I 'connect' with these students?" After some contemplation I decided that the answer existed in "story," and so I began to develop my basic oral communication course around the instructional strategy of "story."

### STORY AS INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

Why "story"? As my daughter Jamie says, "Everything you tell is a story." If that is true (and I believe it is), storytelling becomes a vehicle for discovering who we are, for making sense of our world, for enhancing our learning/teaching, and for plain old fun!

In his book *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action*, Fisher (1989) suggests that human beings are inherently storytellers. Humans experience and understand life as "a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends" (p. 24). Thus, all forms of communication can be seen fundamentally as stories — symbolic interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character.
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I have written elsewhere on the importance of story in education and its value as an instructional strategy (Cooper, 1988, 1989; Cooper and Collins, 1992). Suffice it to say here that students should be encouraged to use stories to "make sense," to enhance their learning. As Schoafsma (1989) indicates:

We who teach often dismiss stories as a primitive form, a form for children something students need to move "beyond" for the learning they will have to do in schools. However, stories, grounded as they are in students' lives and concerns, are an important means students have for making sense of their worlds, an important tool for learning. (p. 89)

As students share their concerns, desires, accomplishments and dreams through their stories, they become members of what Bruner (1986) calls a "culture creating community." According to Bruner, "It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture" (p. 120).

Much schooling today is what Gee (1986) refers to as essay-text literacy: Essay-text literacy . . . is connected with the forms of consciousness and the interests of the powerful in our society" (p. 742). Essay-text literacy is efficient, neatly packaged knowledge. It allows little room for knowledge gained from personal experience. For true learning, narrative knowledge is essential. Narrative knowledge is experiential and cultural knowing. It is the best means available for students to organize their experience for themselves.

Story seemed an appropriate teaching strategy to me for all the above reasons. In addition, teaching effectively in another culture demands some idea about that culture. Stories are vehicles of cultural transmission. If I am to
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teach effectively, I need to understand my students. What better way to reach understanding than through story?

Finally, Chinese students have, for the most part, been taught in very structured ways — in the "essay-text" mode. Lai (1993), in her report of TEFL classroom practice in China, outlines the following:

**TEFL Classroom Practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emphasizing</th>
<th>Neglecting</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. knowledge</td>
<td>English language use</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. explanation</td>
<td>performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. rote learning</td>
<td>comprehension</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. written work</td>
<td>oral work</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. text</td>
<td>situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. uniformity</td>
<td>individuality</td>
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<td>7. reading in chorus</td>
<td>group work</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. minority</td>
<td>majority</td>
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<td>9. criticism</td>
<td>praise</td>
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<td>10. grades for promotion</td>
<td>quality for life</td>
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<td>11. receptive skills</td>
<td>production skills</td>
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Chinese students have little practice in oral communication. The teacher talks; the students listen. The teacher is highly respected and not to be questioned. Storytelling prompts questions and conversation; it provides a catalyst for communication by beginning the communication event with what one knows best — one's own story.
USES OF STORY

On the first day of class I assign the Business Card Activity. I explain that one of the things I was most amazed about in Hong Kong was the prevalence of cards — every person, couple, business had a card. I explain that these cards communicate about the owner — the color, shape, print style, logo. And we perceive certain characteristics about this person based on her/his card. I assign students the task of creating their "business card" to bring to class the next class period. In a sense, this assignment forces students to begin to tell their own story. I divide the students into pairs or small groups to share their cards and answer any questions their classmates might have. Each student then presents her/his card to the class. This assignment leads into a discussion of general communication principles dealing with meaning, language, perception, self-concept, and self-disclosure. I also make reference to this assignment later in the term as students are thinking about speech topics. I suggest they begin with their own interests and give examples of interests discussed during this assignment.

The next assignment — The Proverb — asks students to bring a Chinese proverb to class, explain its meaning, the cultural value it expresses, what the proverb means to them (why they chose it), and what effect the value expressed might have when communicating with a person from a different culture. Most Chinese proverbs are derived from a story. Students are also asked to share (1) the story behind the proverb or (2) the story of how/where they first heard the proverb. This assignment begins the discussion of intercultural communication.

A second intercultural communication assignment is The Personal Anecdote. Each anecdote begins with the same sentence: I am a (put in current age, nationality, and sex), and a (choose relevant adjectives such as hilarious, frightening, con-
fusing, infuriating, heartwarming) cross cultural incident that happened to me occurred in (place and date). Students then describe in detail the incident. Each student brings her/his story, shares it first in a small group and then to the class as a whole. Discussion focuses on what the anecdote tells us about the cultures involved and about ourselves, given our response to the situation described in the anecdote. Finally, discussion focuses on the role of communication in the misperceptions which occur.

Parenthetically, you have no doubt noticed that many of the assignments are discussed first in pairs or small groups rather than individually in front of the class. Because students are speaking in their second language, they feel more comfortable speaking in pairs or a small group prior to speaking in front of all their classmates.

Small group instruction begins with a story — a murder mystery. A murder has been committed which the students must solve. I provide the clues (one to each student) — the story, if you will. The class is given 15 minutes to determine: the murderer, weapon, time and location of the murder, and motive. The only rule is all clues must be given orally. Following this exercise, we discuss the principles of small group communication — size, need for every member to contribute and to contribute in a manner conducive to solving the problem, the importance of fact vs. inference, communication networks, norms, roles, leadership, problem-solving strategies, etc.

Next, each student brings to class a problem she/he needs solved. The problem must deal with the physical world, not their emotional world. For example, the problem might be that they oversleep everyday because they always turn off their alarm clock in their sleep. In small groups, each student tells her/his problem (in essence, a story). The group chooses which problem they want to solve and creates an invention to solve it. The group shares their solution with the class. Group members evaluate their own and their classmates' communi-
Public speaking instruction begins with students writing a story in cinquain form. Poems are read aloud — first in pairs or small groups, then to the class as a shoe. I then point out that they have gone through the steps of speech preparation — topic selection, organization, use of language, relating the topic to self, audience analysis, types of proof, etc. I refer back to this exercise as I discuss speech preparation for the next several days. I also require that students include a personal story in their speeches.

The last unit of the course is storytelling. I begin the unit with the exercise "Real Life Folklore". I want students to understand the role of folktale in their present day lives. I explain that the "folk" are all of us — that folklore exists when people share an identity. Thus, families, classrooms, peers, and organizations such as universities have folklore. Students are then asked to share the folklore of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

The next assignment, "Inviting Groups to Tell a Story," takes students through the process of telling a story. I begin with Chinese fables. I divide the class into groups of four and give each member of each group a copy of a Chinese fable. Each group receives a different fable. Each group member reads the fable silently. The groups discuss members' initial reactions to the fable. Groups then read the fable round robin style and answer the question: What did you learn about the story when you heard it read aloud? Groups then read the story a second time, again in round robin style and then discuss: If you were a picture book artist, which moments in the story would you choose to illustrate? Describe your illustrations in vivid detail. Students are then instructed to turn the text face down and in round robin style, tell the story. Groups then look at the text again and discuss: What was left out in the telling? What additions did you make that "bring the story to life"? How is the story growing in the oral tradition? The
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text is again turned face down, group members stand, and again tell the story in round robin style. Then I tell students: Now, tell the fable to the wall. Literally. Find a space along the wall, face the wall, and tell the fable. After telling to the wall, students recombine into new groups of four. Each student then tells the fable her/his group learned to the other group members. Ideally each group member of the recombined groups has a different fable to tell.

The final assignment in this unit is for students to choose a folktale and tell it to the class. They are encouraged to use puppets, props, music, felt board, or other storytelling techniques.

In addition to these assignments centered around the teaching strategy of story, much of my own classroom communication utilized stories — my own experiences, short fables to introduce concepts, recent news articles, etc.

CONCLUSION

My own story of teaching basic oral communication in a culture different from my own is one of frustration and fascination. It is never, however, a boring story. Let me end with a Chinese story — one that speaks to my experience of teaching at the Chinese University of Hong Kong:

MAY BE

(huo)

A man's horse ran away. "What misfortune," said his friends.
"Maybe," said the man.
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A few days later the horse returned with another, even stronger horse. "What a blessing," exclaimed the friends. "Maybe," replied the man.

The next day his son tried to ride the wild horse but fell off and broke his leg. "What a disaster," cried the friends.

"Maybe," answered the man.

A week later all the young men except the son with the broken leg were taken away to fight in a brutal war. "How wonderfully everything has turned out," marveled the friends.

"Maybe," said the man.

Maybe story isn't the best instructional strategy to use, but maybe it is. Only time will tell!

REFERENCES


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