Disarming Students;
The role of storytelling in student engagement.
Abstract

The current paper is designed to introduce the concept of storytelling as a tool used in practice education and to explore the effectiveness of this from a student’s perspective. The paper is drawing on two separate pieces of research conducted under this theme, with a view to developing a discourse on storytelling in practice education and highlighting both the benefits and obstacles to the effective use of this approach. The discussion of the main findings from this research is considered in relation to a previous literature review conducted on the use of formal stories in education and designed to allow a consideration of the possible use of informal stories in an educational setting.

Keywords

Storytelling, case studies, practice learning.
1. Introduction

A story is a real or imagined account of events that describe an experience. It can be described as words and actions which can be used to describe a sequence of events that capture the imagination of the listener and can be oral, written, visual or digital (Drumm, 2013). Storytelling can be described as the process by which humans articulate their experience of the world and make sense of it (Drumm, 2013). Storytelling can influence change at both an individual practice and an organisational level. At an individual level stories can provide meaning to experiences and can facilitate the development of emotional understanding and empathy. Storytelling can be used to develop a greater understanding of the emotional impact of decisions and changes on people, allowing us to engage with a level of complexity which may not initially be apparent.

Whilst storytelling may comprise a significant element of the approach taken by many academics to delivery of course materials, this has tended to be adopted informally and without significant reference to a theoretical framework to support it. The research team are conducting a number of studies exploring the use of storytelling as a teaching method for practice based learning. The current research focusses on the use of formal and informal stories in the classroom as a teaching tool and on the development of skills and techniques related to this in a variety of workplace settings. The research is primarily being conducted in relation to story-telling in social care, where its application to practice based learning is central to the development of competencies. There may be significant scope to extend storytelling as a methodology to other areas.

Knowledge transfer from education settings to practice settings may not always be a direct linear process and examining attitudes to and use of storytelling presents a useful opportunity to identify the type stories which impact significantly on student learning and by extension on student practice. As educators are in a strong position to influence values development and shape attitudes to practice among students, they can both model use of innovative and creative techniques and use these techniques to maintain engagement and understanding among the student group.
3. Methodology

A mixed methods approach was adopted for the purposes of this study. Questionnaires comprising of six closed questions and one open question were administered to 34 social care students in Ireland. The questionnaires related to the use of informal storytelling, the impact and the perceived obstacles to using storytelling as a tool. One open question asked the students to recount a story which they encountered which had an impact on them during their education. 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with social care students during the period May-September 2015. These interviews consisted of a range of questions asking students about the stories they had encountered in education which had impacted significantly on them.

3. Findings

There was broad agreement among the student cohort that storytelling was utilized by academics in the delivery of lecture materials. The majority of the participants (n=32) felt that storytelling was used often/very often in their education. An equal number felt it was a very useful way to help to explain theoretical perspectives and concepts. Students’ particularly valued first person documented practice stories and specifically mentioned these ‘real life’ stories in terms of direct experience of social care settings. Students also made significant reference to the value role plays and television documentaries and movie clips as being a useful way to connect theoretical material to personal or professional experiences. Students highlighted the use of stories to discuss innovative practice examples and alternatives ways to deal with challenging issues.

Participants highlighted personal stories, humorous stories, case studies and professional practice stories as being most significant in terms of impact. The students felt that the stories were particularly useful to extend their learning in tutorials and lectures. In terms of outcomes they felt that the stories could be used by lecturing staff very effectively for the basic purpose of engaging students but also to address ethical issues and to help develop professional self-concept. Bettelheim (1976) provides a detailed discussion of the role of stories in developing self-concept in children.
The student cohort felt that the use of storytelling could be most beneficial to teach about how to deal with issues or conflict in social care practice and for the purposes of self-care and professional development. In relation to obstacles to the effective use of storytelling in their own practice (e.g. on practice placement) the student’s highlighted concerns regarding making judgements about appropriate disclosure of information (n =14), concerns about misuse of information which they might share in a practice setting (n= 17) and the challenge of having or finding a story which served some useful purpose in direct work with service users (n= 14).

The students were all able to clearly identify both the formal and informal use of stories which had an impact on them during their education. Formal story telling was identified by students as being effective in enabling them to develop a greater understanding of service user’s backgrounds or to explore the relationship between variables in service user’s life, such as considering the different endings to a story if different decisions were made by professionals and service users.

In terms of informal storytelling, students felt that this approach in the classroom encouraged further reflection for them in terms of considering their role in different interactions and engagement whilst on placement, as well as encouraging them to consider alternative approaches to doing things. They also felt that the story telling used in the classroom allowed them to consider experiences from different perspectives.

Students highlighted the benefits of storytelling in the classroom when used as a tool to discuss techniques and practicalities of dealing with sensitive issues such as confidentiality, disclosures and inappropriate behaviour. As with study one the students emphasised the importance of storytelling in helping to explain theories and they talked about the stories reinforcing their interest in the subject and in social care as a profession.
4. Conclusions and Future Work

The present research emphasises the value of storytelling as an approach within social education and practice. Stevenson (2015) identifies the potential of story to make an impact suggesting that in many contexts even “bad stories trump good science” in terms of communicating a message or changing behaviour. It is also evident that informal use of storytelling appears to be relatively common, however this is not reflected in a move towards formally adopting storytelling as an approach within education or training.

The educational practice which most closely parallels the use of storytelling currently is the use of case studies. Case studies present realistic, complex, and contextually rich situations and often involve a dilemma, conflict, or problem that one or more of the characters in the case must negotiate (www.cmu.edu). Case studies can present real life situations and “bridge the gap between theory and practice and between the academy and the workplace” (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005, p.182). Case studies offer a number of advantages in allowing for ambiguity and facilitating student engagement in the ‘grey areas’ of decision making. This provides scope for students to engage problem solving skills and complex decision making. Cases studies may also allow for a level of personalisation of quite abstract concepts as we can place an individual at the centre of the case study. However we need to be aware of the potential pitfalls associated with oversimplification as we attempt to distil a ‘life-story’ into a digestible case study. The case study approach in common with storytelling may have a tendency to focus on the ‘exceptional’ at the expense of ‘ordinary’ experiences. There appears to be scope to formally adopt a variety of other storytelling techniques to supplement the use of case studies in the classroom. The organic nature of the storytelling approach provides a significant level of flexibility in comparison to the relatively structured case study style approach. However, McIntyre & Lendzionowski (2015) caution that formal structures need to be in place to help the storytelling process to create outcome-focused thinking and action planning.
References


