

A review of undergraduates' stories about their learning experiences analysed using the lens of fairy tales

Research in Education
2022, Vol. 114(1) 3–19
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DOI: 10.1177/00345237221139886

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Abstract

Storytelling is an aspect of research that has gathered significant popularity but is less commonly discussed in the context of student feedback. This paper focuses on how it can be applied to improve a dialogue and relationship with the student so that their learning can be understood in more depth. Forty-seven undergraduates studying an Early Childhood degree in England shared their stories and analysis indicated a synergy between the content, the patterns and themes that are found in fairy tales. This framework led to a deeper insight into the factors that impact their learning experiences. Three structures found in fairy tales are described in this paper; 'contractual', which explains how rules that reflect the values of the individual are shaped by society and culture; 'performative', that communicate emotions experienced during struggles and challenges; and 'disjunctive', that describe the journey of change and transformation within the story (Greimas AJ (1983) *Structural Semantics*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press). Within each story the author identified examples of aspects that were strange and familiar and others that were familiar, yet strange, uncovering students' priorities and uprooting the writer's hidden assumptions (Bruner J (2003) *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press). The paper concludes that when lecturers analyse storytelling in this way it becomes a dialogue that contributes to relational pedagogy.

Keywords

Storytelling, student experience, higher education, relational pedagogy, fairy tales

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Introduction

As I pour over the student survey feedback, I am struck by how little it tells me about students' experience of learning at university. The mean value is green throughout, which I know is positive, yet I am curious to know more. Short sentences peppered with 'brilliant', 'enjoyable', 'friendly', 'comfortable' leave me hungry to better understand what that means in the writer's own terms...

This reflection became a starting point to use storytelling as a dialogue between the me and the students that contributes to a relational pedagogy. Applying Freire's (cited by [Shor, 1993](#)) explanation, relational pedagogy assumes an understanding of education as a social dynamic between the student and the teacher recognising the role of social, cultural and political positions. As [Biesta \(2015\)](#) suggests, the role of the education exists within a web of relationships that build on the connection between the professional (academic) and client (student). These webs become important as they help to unpick and explore the inter-relational experiences of academics and students.

The limited information provided through surveys drew my attention to the lack of detail about what student's experience involved ([Callender et al., 2014](#)). At one level I recognised their world as familiar (meeting deadlines, writing, communicating new ideas) and yet strange (navigating new social spaces and experiencing pressure linked to anxiety about progress and being accepted). This paper proposes that storytelling enables lecturers to challenge their assumptions and reflect on their understanding of what it is like for students studying at university. Learning more about their lives had the potential to shape a relational pedagogy and make their learning space more productive. I believe that this method promotes a dialogue that arises from [Buber's \(1998\)](#) practice of listening to create meanings which may be different from my own. Applying storytelling as a tool for dialogue had the potential to afford a bidirectional benefit, as shown in previous research, where those involved described it as a helpful process, articulated by one participant as 'empowering' saying that it 'helped me to work myself out a bit' ([Sherwood and Nind, 2014: 466](#)).

In this research 47 undergraduates studying a degree in Early Childhood in England took part and came from three of my teaching groups. Group one (N15) were first year students who used a story to write about their current experiences since commencing university. Group two (N12) were third year students who wrote a story to describe the learning that had arisen from one lecture. Group three (N20) formed four groups to co-create a story about their learning during a third-year core module. In reviewing the results, I took the role of a stranger who wanted to 'interrogate my own pedagogical approach' ([Trahar, 2011: 48](#)).

Analysis of the undergraduates' stories has led to two papers, the first focusing on how the lecturer could use these findings to shape their teaching and assessment ([Sherwood, 2019](#)). The second and purpose of this paper is to show how the construction and content of the undergraduate's stories became a channel for dialogue. When analysing the results, I could see that their story contained examples of strange and familiar concepts which are commonly found in fairy tales ([Bruner, 2003](#)) and helped me to understand the student's world contributing to a dialogic and relational pedagogy.

This research addresses the following research questions:

1. How does storytelling and narrative promote a dialogue between the lecturer and the student?
2. What can we learn about undergraduates' learning experiences when we analyse their stories using the structures found in fairy tales and how can this be applied to build a relational pedagogy?

This paper begins by introducing the subject of storytelling as a tool for reflection. It then identifies the contribution that the structure of fairy tales brings to our understanding of relationship with students. I continue by explaining what the literature advises when applying a dialogic, relational pedagogy. The methodology sets out how the data was gathered and analysed using an example of how fairy tales are constructed and integrate strange and familiar concepts. The findings and discussion include extracts from the undergraduates' stories that illustrate how their experiences are linked to contractual, performative and disjunctive features. The paper concludes by explaining how storytelling offers a different tool for communication that uncovers an understanding of how students experience and adapt to challenges with examples of how studying at university represents a transformative experience that shapes pedagogy in a dialogic and relational way.

Literature review

Storytelling and reflection

Telling a personal story involves reflecting upon life and explaining experiences to someone else. According to [Kearney \(2002: 3\)](#) 'stories are what make our lives worth living'. Storytelling is valued because it is a natural and useful tool for giving structure to the chaos of our minds. It enables us to re-visit an experience, to re-interpret it and understand it at a deeper level, locating both where and who we are ([Bolton, 2014](#); [Booker, 2004](#); [Bruner, 2003](#); [Grant et al., 2012](#); [McCormack, 2009](#)). Within this process, 'A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories' ([Connelly and Clandinin, 1990: 4](#)). This suggests that including storytelling as an activity is beneficial because in stories, we discover ways of communicating that let us know who we are.

Researchers have studied a variety of tools that facilitate reflection and identify its benefits in higher education. One example is to enable undergraduates to reflect on how their studies can be applied in practice within the workplace. This would be particularly useful for Early Childhood Study students who are close to completion or graduation and looking for employment ([Bolton, 2014](#); [Lenton, 2015](#); [Rose and Rogers, 2012](#); [Sherwood, 2019](#)). Additionally, in situations where undergraduates feel vulnerable and lack agency, using storytelling as a tool for reflection has been shown to support them in managing their feelings ([Biesta, 2007](#); [McCormack, 2009](#); [O'Keefe and Tait, 2004](#)). [Pereira \(2009\)](#) recognises that the narratives embedded in tales:

Incorporate into our perception and cognition of the world, influencing our interpretation of events and social relationships and guiding our actions and attitudes (1012).

Early Childhood students in [Flanagan's \(2014\)](#) research report that applying story-telling activities led to an improvement in their reflective and analytical skills. In summary, the potential benefits include, applying learning to the workplace, developing positive self-efficacy and cognitive skills along with improving their reflective and writing skills.

It has been proposed that undergraduates who use storytelling to reflect, begin to make sense of the present, which supports them in dealing with changing circumstances ([Grant et al., 2012](#); [Watson, 2009](#)). A possible explanation for this is that the process of writing the story facilitates an interactive dialogue involving the past and present with an eye on the future ([McCormack, 2009](#); [McMahon and Watson, 2013](#); [Sharples et al., 2014](#)). [Nutbrown \(2011\)](#) contends that sometimes it is the only way to 'bring out and critique a challenging issue' (243).

According to [Bruner \(2003\)](#) writing stories is one way to capture the narrative of the individual and encourage them to reflect in ways that make the familiar strange and the strange familiar enabling the undergraduate to re-visit their experiences and understand them at a deeper level. He admits that this process can be 'murky, hard to pin down...' (5) but argues that it is important for recognising and coming to terms with the oddities and surprises of the human condition. When students are given the opportunity to write about their experiences it has been found to lead to a deeper understanding and engagement with the subject, enabling them to recognise their learning in creative and multiple contexts ([Burchell and Dyson, 2000](#); [Connelly and Clandinin, 1990](#); [Court et al., 2009](#); [English, 2016](#); [Golubchikov, 2015](#); [Heinemeyer and Durham, 2017](#); [Layen and Hattingh, 2018](#); [Power, 2016](#)).

How fairy tales influence the structure used in storytelling

Literature provides suggestions that may explain why students are inclined to include aspects of the fairy tale structure when asked to create a story about themselves. For examples [Hawkes \(2003\)](#) notes that they have been identified in individual narratives over many generations. [Brewer \(2006\)](#) suggests that the influence of fairy tales is universal. He also contends that they represent complex psychological processes often linked to transformation and growth to maturity. During my analysis of the students' stories recording their learning experiences, I noted examples of how they had identified threats and hopes that touch the psyche in special ways, encouraging resilience, self-esteem and confidence, which had an alignment with the common threads that are embedded within a fairy tale. As [Mitchell \(2010: 269\)](#) explains, in essence they verbalise:

an allegorical story, the representational process of which is drawn from a vast list of human conditions and experiences.

The opening to a fairy tale is something that [Wexelblatt \(2001\)](#) suggests stimulates a memory, so that when people hear the phrase “Once upon a time,” it prompts a sense of anticipation. When suggesting the origin of this response he explains that many have either been introduced to them by adults reading to them or through the film versions and thus the content and structure are absorbed at a subliminal level. This suggests that when we are asked to write a story the structure and content may be unconsciously influenced through our exposure to fairy tales. Further to this, the presentation is shaped by the order of events so that our stories include a beginning, middle and end ([Cooper, 2000](#); [Parsons, et al., 2015](#)). This use of regular structure helps the writer and reader to identify with the story and facilitates communication of events shaped by culture and individual experience.

Using fairy tales to analyse how stories are structured is one way to interpret how the writer has applied past experiences to make sense of the present ([Ferrante, 2018](#); [Mitchell, 2010](#)). [El’koninova \(2014\)](#) proposes that within the structure of a story there is the intention to move towards a destination and put things right, something that is typically shown within the traditional fairy tale. This is pertinent to [Hawkes \(2003\)](#) argument that storytelling holds two roles: one being self-regulation and the other transformation. These components, at the root of a fairy tale can be mapped into the lives of undergraduates as they showed me in the stories they wrote.

Implications of storytelling for teaching

Introducing storytelling as an opportunity for undergraduates to communicate their learning experiences sets up a dialogue between the student(s) and the lecturer enabling both to reflect on aspects that whilst familiar are also strange because they are explained from the position of the individual. When initiating storytelling, lecturers need to provide guidance and encouragement, recognising that interpretation and reflection does not come readily to all undergraduates ([Bolton, 2011](#); [O’Keefe and Tait, 2004](#); [Rose and Rogers, 2012](#)). [Flanagan \(2014\)](#) suggests that students benefit from support so that they build confidence in writing stories particularly if they do not consider themselves to be natural storytellers. In practice, it is useful to encourage and value their efforts providing them with examples of the diverse ways that students approach the task.

[Parsons et al. \(2015\)](#) explain that some of their participants found the process of writing a story awkward and that they were unable to or, did not want to expose their true responses for fear of negative reactions. The impact of this can be mitigated by suggesting that students share what they have written within small, self-selected groups as shown in this research where the third-year undergraduates worked together to write a composite story. When this activity is managed within a supportive and relational environment, there is the opportunity for gradual development of this style of writing ([Bolton, 2011](#); [Burchell and Dyson, 2000](#)). Explaining to students that storytelling is an opportunity to examine subjective meanings that will help them to construct their personal position, linked to empowerment and achieving their potential is important ([O’Keefe and Tait, 2004](#); [Trahar, 2011](#)).

Methodology

The participants for this research were 47 undergraduates studying Early Childhood Studies, from three different groups I taught. They were asked to hand write a story about their learning experiences during a seminar. The subject of their story was focused on their experiences of a lecture, or a module or a year of study. Fairy tales were not mentioned, and direction was minimal with no guidance on format or length. The intention was that students would have autonomy to decide the form of their story and its content. I explained that it was not an assessed task but rather a communication tool to tell me more about their learning experiences so that I could find out about their studies from their perspective. Groups 1 (reviewing their experience of study over the past year since joining the university) and 2 (writing about a lecture) chose to work individually without discussion with each other; Group 3 (whose story was about the module they had just completed) chose to co-create their stories in clusters of five organised around the tables where they had sat over the previous 10 weeks. They requested flip chart pens and large sheets of paper on which to record their story. The lack of boundaries and direction could have potentially led to anxiety for some students but in this research each individual and group entered the writing and drawing process willingly, at their own pace and with enthusiasm.

The participants are presented in three groups:

Group 1: First-year students who wrote a story about their learning experiences over the previous year since arriving at university (N = 15).

Group 2: Third-year students who wrote a story about a single lecture (N = 12).

Group 3: Third-year students who formed four groups to compose a story about their learning experiences at the end of a core module (N = 20).

Forty-one of the students were female, six male and their ages ranged between 19 and 40. Permission to share the content of their story in a published paper was requested and all students were informed that the paper would accurately represent their stories by applying verbatim extracts and that any individual identifying features would be removed. Following the ethical guidelines published by the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018) I requested each student's informed consent and explained their right to withdraw their story. I was careful to check that this activity did not raise any difficulties for students and was prepared to signpost sources of support should that have become necessary. The procedure was shared and agreed by the university ethics committee prior to the collection of data. None of the participants showed a negative response to writing their story and all wanted their stories to be included in my research.

Analysis of student's stories

The process of analysis sought to uncover the story behind the undergraduates' writing as a different way for lecturers to establish a dialogue with them. To achieve this, narrative analysis was applied using a constructionist lens to identify key features and how they had been conveyed. This began by applying Nolan et al.'s (2013) advice to consider the completed story. They also endorse this process because 'participants voices and views'

(215) can then be identified. Further analysis followed Silverman's (2020) procedure of recording norms, orders, patterns, rules and structures. The common themes that emerged from this process were how students made decisions, the role of feelings, making connections with others and changes over time. The final stages of analysis identified where common structure and content matched those within fairy tales and the strange and familiar theory which is illustrated with an example below and recommended by Silverman (2020) as a tool for interpreting qualitative data arising from narrative.

Analysis of the undergraduates' stories suggested two influences, firstly, Bruner's (2003) theory of narrative analysis which proposes that within an individual's story there is both the familiar and the strange and that each informs the other. Secondly, I applied Silverman's (2020) advice to analyse the narratives within the undergraduates' stories identifying parallels with the structures that are found in fairy tales (see Propp, 1968).

Propp's (1968) pioneering analysis of fairy tales led to 31 functions that have been a source of interest to others whose focus is on semantics and semiotics within narratives (including; Andonovska-Trajkovska, 2012; Culler, 1983; Greimas, 1983; Hawkes, 2003; Kafalenos, 1997; Murphy, 2008). Greimas (1983) applied the work of Propp (1968) to isolate several distinctive structures and three of these were found to be regularly integrated into the undergraduates' storytelling. These are "contractual structures" that show how contracts are made, broken and shaped by society and personal values; "performative structures" that identify the role of trials and struggles as well as the emotions that they engender and "disjunctive structures" that describe the journey of change and transformation involved in leaving and arriving.

To illustrate how the undergraduates' stories of their learning experiences can be mapped to the strange, familiar dynamic found in fairy tales I have selected Jack and the Beanstalk. Jack's contract begins when he sells the family's cow for strange magic beans. An undergraduate's contract begins when they agree to pay fees for their university education, something familiar and involving virtual payment but strange because they are not sure what they are going to receive. When Jack climbs the strange beanstalk he encounters a giant, a section of the fairy tale that communicates the performative structure of challenge and emotion. Undergraduates embark on a familiar journey in study that becomes strange because it is a 'giant' leap that involves performative structures in the challenge it presents. The result is triumph when Jack returns with 'gold' and for students when they graduate, illustrating disjunctive structures. This is because a transformation has taken place during the undergraduate journey. These prizes are both familiar and strange because while they encapsulate familiar rewards the strange is illustrated in the unique impact it has on their lives.

Adopting Bruner (2003) and Griemas (1983) interpretations led to the dialogue between me and the student about what study is like from their perspective. Applying these concepts to analysis illustrates how undergraduate storytelling can be used as a tool for reflection that has a bi-directional and dialogic impact on the lecturer and the student (English, 2016). It provides the student a different way to share their voice and opens opportunities for the lecturer and the undergraduate to review the experience of learning at university in more depth setting up the practice of relational pedagogy described above.

The findings below record verbatim extracts from the students' stories and are used to illustrate links to contractual, performative and disjunctive structures alongside Bruner's theory of familiar and strange concepts. Although I applied an iterative approach and included other colleagues' views, claims made below recognise Greimas' (1983) view that the procedure is determined by the subjective perceptions of the analyst.

Findings and discussion

Throughout this section the analysis focuses on how students' storytelling applied a fairy tale structure alongside the familiar/strange dynamic. The outcome is linked to how the process can be used as a dialogic/relational pedagogy.

Stories written by first year undergraduates

First-year undergraduates, who were reflecting on their first year of study, used their stories to communicate significant disruption in their lives. They report their feelings about moving to what in a fairy tale situation would be described as a 'foreign land'.

Moving away from my boyfriend was hard but two weeks of partying put my mind off it. However time flies when you're having fun it was time to knuckle down and focus on what I was really here for... essay after essay. (G1.1)

When I started university I didn't know what to expect. Once I had moved into halls I felt sad and weird as it was my first time away from home. My first day was awkward as I didn't know anyone. (G1.2)

A shy girl decided to come to university. She was a very quiet individual and didn't know anybody else that was attending. (G1.3)

Not only did these students record the performative (challenge) and disjunctive (change) features engendered by moving and navigating a new landscape, but they also included the role of others and the strange feelings they experienced when finding themselves isolated. This suggests a link to many traditional fairy tales that describe how the central character moves away from a familiar location and in the process of rediscovering themselves encounters and connects with strangers.

This experience embedded in fairy tales shows the challenges of transition. Feelings of isolation have been scrutinised and explained in research by Small (2014: 74), who interprets this as a lack of 'social glue to connect their academic and personal lives'. McCormack (2009) adds to this discourse identifying the complexity of inevitable highs such as 'intellectual challenge, confidence, passion, competence and excitement' alongside the lows of 'loneliness, doubt, fear, uncertainty, abandonment' (146). Hughes and Mesmuir (2010) also explain that Childhood students in their study experienced difficulties in their transition to university such as 'concern about study processes and skills and anxiety about progress' (158).

Lurking in the background are the requirements for students to meet course expectations, highlighting the contractual (compliance) structures within their storytelling. They seemed to measure themselves by providing examples of their success in meeting the standards of the university.

I have also met some amazing and supportive lecturers who make my essays enjoyable because I can see that they love that job and that they are passionate too. (G1.4)

I've managed to get myself organised and revise and work in the library most days. As now I'm determined to do well as I 100% now know this is what I want to do in the future and I don't want to fail again. (G1.5)

I have done amazingly well in my work and I still haven't failed an essay...yet! (G1.6)

The contractual structure within these extracts suggests that students are intent on following a standardised procedure shaped by expectations within society to achieve success and that this leads to feelings of pride in their achievements. Whilst this is understandable, [Stern and Backhouse \(2011\)](#) and Freire (cited by [Shor, 1993](#)) caution us against results being the dominant aim in pedagogy, going as far as to suggest that where that is the case the communal nature of the relationship can be destroyed. In psychological terms, as [English \(2016\)](#) suggests, telling their story gives license to celebrating success which is an empowering experience measuring how an individual has changed over time. The disjunctive (change) content is often reflected within fairy tales and represents aspirational goals congruent with the values in society such as becoming rich and finding happiness with a partner.

The extracts from these stories became part of a dialogue that suggested that undergraduates are inclined to make decisions that match inherent values, something that is also portrayed in characters such as parent, heroine, donor and helper in fairy tales. These first-year students helped me to make a relational connection as I noted how their studies (as is my practice) had often been driven by the 'should', and 'ought-to' and 'supposed-to' ([Bath, 2011](#); [Bruner, 2003](#); [Hughes and Menmuir, 2010](#); [Mitchell, 2010](#); [Trahar, 2011](#)).

When undergraduates identify what they understand as the 'correct' way to behave, there is a synergy with the key messages found in many fairy tales. [Bolton \(2014: 77\)](#) argues that the type of binary thinking that is often present in our stories is shaped by 'organisational, social and political structures and ideologies in which we are enmeshed.' The content of these stories infers aspects of students' cultural and social identity which are important for a lecturer to be aware of when they are planning their teaching ([Bamberg, 2004](#); [Court et al., 2009](#); [Hughes and Mesmuir, 2010](#)).

Whilst the stories above illustrate how the student's behaviour can be shaped by expectations this contributor added another layer that expressed the complexity of life at university when juxtaposed with their personal circumstances:

First year daunting right? Of course. Mine was great. The university was so friendly, I felt so confident, I could do this. The course started talking about being there for children and giving them the attention they deserved. It started to feel like my own course told me I shouldn't be

there. It was like grey clouds had covered the original sunshine. Grey clouds only got heavier and I started to wonder if my own child got the attention he craved. Grey clouds, eventually rain and my child said he loved me without me saying it first, it felt like the sun shone and that university only worked if everyone supports you. Now I know that there will be grey clouds after sun but everything is a cycle and sun will always shine after rain. (G1.7)

The echoes of new and strange situations and the challenges that arise from undergraduates asking questions of themselves are poignant. This extract illustrates where the contractual, performative and disjunctive features intersect providing a story that is rich in description with familiar and strange ideas. The need for approval is a characteristic that Brewer (2006) notes in his analysis of fairy tales. An example of this is posed by Zhetner (2013) who explains that fairy tales embed the idea that hard work pays off and delayed gratification is sometimes necessary shown in stories such as ‘Dick Whittington’. As Brogan and Da Ros-Voseles (2012) contend fairy tales provide the reader and listener with advice about daily living, fitting into society and taking responsibility, something apparent in these undergraduates’ stories.

Brewer (2006) explains that authors of fairy tales would have chosen content that provides a message likely to be approved of by the reader. Establishing exactly how undergraduates make sense of and respond to the contractual process is complex and multi-faceted suggesting that recognising this as a dialogue is a contributing factor in developing a relational pedagogy.

Stories written by individual third-year undergraduates

Some of the undergraduates writing a story about the lecture that they had attended the previous week were hesitant about how to communicate their experiences. Others turned to the structure of a traditional fairy tale beginning with the words ‘once upon a time’ something that Kearney (2002: 5) describes as lighting ‘...bonfires in the imaginations of his listeners’. This contributor used this to align their writing to the traditional fairy tale integrating familiar characters as shown here:

Many scholars tried and failed to teach the prince, who hated learning. But then the phonics fairy spread and sprinkled her magic dust teaching the boy phonics. And he loved the fairy and her fairy dust and became the phonics prince. (G2.1)

This extract illustrates the influence of strange and familiar that are juxtaposed to show transformation expressed using the imagery and characters found in fairy tales. The characters of prince and fairy are well known and altered to construct the prince in need of rescue, in place of the traditional portrayal of rescuer as an example of radical liberatory thinking. The story depicts the disjunctive characteristics of the learning journey where the individual is changed because of their education (Dickerson et al. 2016). The role of the ‘donor’ and ‘helper’ found in this story are also shown in these accounts where the writers identify interpersonal relationships as a catalyst for change (Jenkins et al., 2001; Leyen and Hattingh, 2018).

I learnt that children's talk allow them to recollect and describe what they have learnt. (G2.2)

I began to consider how language and intonation is used in storytelling, how repetition helps children become excited in their knowledge by the story. (G2.3)

It is vital that practitioners encourage interactions with children in order for them to learn or expand their learning. (G2.4)

These extracts from the undergraduates' storytelling suggested the role of university in conscious and unconscious transformation and by providing these details, a maturation when compared to the contributions from first years (Booker, 2004; Mitchell, 2010; Watson, 2009). The content above suggested that students communicating their experience in the form of a story supports their ability to make sense of what they have learnt (McCormack, 2009; Sharples et al., 2014).

The student enjoyed this lecture very much and thought about it all the way home. (G2.4)

She walked home, pondering on many ways that numbers could be learnt through songs and stories. (G2.5)

These extracts from the stories may at first sight suggest a departure from the fairy tale narrative yet the combination of emotion and travel communicate a synergy between learning and movement which is co-present in the accounts of the hero or heroine. Their dialogic quality provided me with details of the impact of the lecture that enriched previous feedback shown on the module survey.

Stories written by groups of third-year undergraduates

The third-year undergraduates who decided to work in groups of five co-created a story about the module they had just completed. Each group chose to use flip chart paper to communicate their stories applying a combination of pictures and words. The longest text included a woman on a journey of discovery:

She poured the old things, no longer shiny and precious on the ground and scooped up the new inspiring objects, placing them carefully in her bags. She confidently continued on the path excited by what she might find and who she would meet. (G3.1)

Suddenly she found herself in a situation; she had to make a choice; does she continue on her path with her once most precious things or embrace the new surprisingly inspiring objects? (G3.1)

This story combined familiar and strange images with the dilemma of making choices that are congruent with contractually shaped values and beliefs moulded by what they interpreted as right and wrong. Their narrative included the emotions that are reflected in the performative and disjunctive elements of the story such as change and emerging as a character who found something precious through the choices she made. Here there are

signs going beyond the taken for granted and expressing liberatory thinking. [Brogan and Da Ros-Voseles \(2012\)](#) explain how this method is used in fairy tales showing the reader that struggles are important because they help us to recognise and deal with the inevitable problems encountered in real life.

Tears were visible on their faces, feelings of fear, uncertainty and despair in their expressions.
(G3.2)

Yet, the undergraduates who reflected on their learning journey, identified struggle by sharing negative emotions. In this case the antagonists may have been linked to anxiety about progress. [Flanagan \(2014\)](#) provides a possible explanation stating that storytelling enables the writer to identify initial emotional disruption that can (as seen below) lead to subsequent intellectual restoration. This dilemma is an element that [Zhetner \(2013\)](#) describes in fairy tales arguing that they enable us to make sense of 'life's bewilderment' (161). She also contends that the key characters and their relationships with one another shape the identity and self-hood of the reader. In this case I found myself identifying with this cycle of emotion to restoration enhancing my connection with the students. As shown here they also provide triggers for change.

Tree of knowledge (G3.3)

Branches of opportunity (shown in pictures and annotations on flip chart paper) (G3.3)

This combination of pictures and words blended strange imagery from nature with familiar terms such as the positive results of knowledge and opportunity.

Other Third year students recorded the journey beyond the end of the module illustrating the role of disjunctive structures that align with those found in fairy tales.

to be continued...we hope for a happy ending.... (G3.4)

Pictures that showed their graduation accompanied this annotation, illustrating the return and recognition also embedded within fairy tales where the characters gather to mark the 'happily ever after' at, for example a wedding or triumphant return. These images seem to be influenced by maturation and shaped by the expectations within society.

The process of learning embedded in these stories included how these students interpreted [Bruner's \(2003\)](#) dynamic of strange and familiar. What may have been strange at the beginning of their studies became familiar and shaped their future, including actions that would lead them to a significant role within the early years' workplace.

Students who wrote about the positive outcomes that arose from their learning included the role of the 'helper' and how working with others had an impact on their knowledge, thinking and emotions. The language and content they used is reflected in story lines within fairy tales as [Propp \(1968\)](#) when he describes how wisdom is introduced via a character who plays the role of donor or helper to rescue the heroine in stories such as

‘Sleeping Beauty’ and ‘Beauty and the Beast’. The content analysis provided a dialogue that informed and challenged me to recognise where students’ versions of strange and familiar intersected with mine.

Conclusion

This paper addresses two questions, how storytelling promotes a dialogue between me (the lecturer) and student and what can be discovered from undergraduates’ learning experiences when we analyse their stories using the structures found in fairy tales. Information from analysing these storytelling events can be applied to build a relational pedagogy between lecturers and students, a balance that Freire suggests is a “‘near mystery” of democratic practice’ (cited by [Shor, 1993](#): 29). These can help to develop deeper understandings of students’ experiences.

The first question is answered through advice found in the literature ([Bolton, 2011](#); [Connelly and Clandinin, 1990](#); [Flanagan, 2014](#); [O’Keefe and Tait, 2004](#); [Rose and Rogers, 2012](#)) with examples of its application described in the methodology. To answer the second question, the analysis of the extracts from stories illustrated where the content of fairy tales and the familiar/strange dynamic intersect. The results showed insights into what it is like to study at university, information, that would have otherwise remained hidden ([Bruner, 2003](#); [Clough and Nutbrown, 2014](#)) shining ‘a light differently on things’ ([Selbie and Clough, 2005](#): 116). It encouraged a response of curiosity which, according to [Stern and Backhouse \(2011\)](#), is key to stimulating dialogue. For example, I reviewed individual’s learning experiences and priorities from the position of the writer and found:

- Contractual evidence that focused on how undergraduates interpret right and wrong behaviours and how these are shaped by the university and personal rules reflecting values, culture and society;
- Performative evidence shown as they communicated emotional turmoil, doubts, loneliness and fear alongside intense joy, pride and satisfaction;
- Disjunctive evidence as they told the story of change that had led to transformation.

These examples are significant when applying a relational pedagogy because they enable the lecturer to engage with the complexity of students’ lives and dislodge their personal taken-for-granted assumptions ([Ashwin et al., 2015](#); [Buber, 1998](#); [Shor, 1993](#)). These findings also provided data that can be applied to practice with recommendations that shape teaching and wellbeing, offering advice on how the academic can support undergraduates in building relationships and approaching assessments with confidence ([Sherwood, 2019](#)).

A limitation in this research is identified by [Porter Abbott \(2002\)](#) who warns that when examining an individual’s narrative ‘almost invariably we overlook things that are there and put in things that are not there’ (79). By filling in the gaps I realise I was in danger of taking over the narrative to prejudice it with content that was important to my interests and values and as this research was essentially dialogic, my ability to listen objectively may have been limited by this. Whilst Buber’s philosophy of dialogue implies the need to

listen, Gordon (2011) suggests the outcome of listening leads to connection that affords transformation which I propose is something that listening to stories facilitates.

Inevitably, storytelling resists a single interpretation and in this research the tool of interpretation has revealed something of myself as well as the storyteller (Doyle and Carter, 2007). Porter Abbott (2002) says that because narrative does not require a restrictive definition or criteria it ‘produces the building blocks out of which more complex forms are built’ (12). In this research using the lens of fairy tales changed my understanding, enabling me to discover aspects of story writing that helped to explain how students communicate behaviour, change, challenges, hopes and dreams.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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