Storyline -
Promoting Language
Across the Curriculum

By Steve Bell and Sallie Harkness
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Storyline - Promoting Language Across the Curriculum

This book is dedicated to our colleague and friend Fred W Rendell who, as founder member and leader of the Staff Tutor Team, Jordanhill College of Education, was instrumental in developing this approach.

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And so the story begins…

Storyline in action

The children have worked hard to transform shoes boxes into models of market stalls. They have each made a market trader and have shared this character’s background and personality - their hopes, dreams and secret worries. Each pair is excited about their own stall and what it has to sell. They are in hot debate about where the best pitches are likely to be located - and no-one wants their stall to be next to the fish stall because of the smell.

Two groups of children are working out how they will both get access to the electricity supply – one want to keep their meat fresh, the other to play the music they want to sell. They know that they must keep within the health and safety rules; the health and safety inspector is due to visit soon. Already, every market trader has ensured that fire appliances and exit routes are clearly displayed, and that access and cleanliness routines adhered to.

But this class has yet to discover a problem lurking just around the corner: a new supermarket is about to open nearby...
Chapter 1

Learning Through Storyline

“In creative classrooms, teachers are mindful of... standards, but they approach required topics with a playful enthusiasm that inspires students to learn. They prompt students to think deeply, pose questions, and pursue "big ideas" from many perspectives. And they allow students to show their understanding of essential curriculum concepts in their own ways.” (Black, 2003)

What is Storyline?

Storyline is a teaching methodology that allows teachers and pupils to construct jointly the curriculum so that it addresses the children’s interests and concerns, whilst ensuring that core curricular knowledge and skills are covered and that teachers meet the demands for accountability. It was first developed in Scotland to enhance pupil engagement and to facilitate the integration of the curriculum, and is currently used in Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands as well as parts of the USA and Thailand.

As a strategy for learning and teaching, Storyline provides a cross-curricular, topic based method of teaching that uses the structure of a story to enable the teacher and pupils to co-construct the curriculum. In Storyline teaching, the teacher plans a ‘line’ of episodes, but asks key questions that require the pupils to create the ‘story’ that contextualises each episode and gives them ownership and control over what happens.

Each Storyline begins with two episodes in which the children create the characters and the settings (in either order). A third episode details an initiating event or incident that kicks the story off. Further episodes detail incidents that develop complications and elaborations leading to a highpoint or culminating event and resolution. The final episode is always a review - essentially a teaching tool that enables children to describe what they have done, what they learned, and how this can be applied and used elsewhere.
This structure provides a clear and liberating contract of engagement between the teacher and the pupils, forming a powerful partnership that drives the learning narrative.

Storyline was originally developed in Scotland the 1960s at a time when teachers were trained to teach separate subjects using textbooks. New national policy developments had demanded a different, cross-curricular approach that used:

- Child/learner centred approaches
- Activity learning/discovery methods
- Differentiated groupwork
- Integrated subject areas
- Skills and concepts

It grew organically. A team of academics working in partnership with teachers in schools experimented with ways of working that moved away from single subject teaching and the fragmented curriculum that this produced. Gradually, over the ensuing years, the most effective pattern to emerge was based on the creation of a working context through a story (Harrison & Marker, 1996, p. 53-58 and 127).

Parallels with educational concerns today in England, Scotland and the USA are obvious. Whilst the curriculum reforms in these countries during the 1990s produced some benefits, teachers, parents and policy makers were beginning to express some concerns about the fragmentation of the curriculum and levels of pupil disengagement. More and more voices stressed the need for confidence, creativity and innovation in education. The engagement and creativity of the Reggio Emilia approach to early years education has had international acclaim, and the 2003 report *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003) emphasised creativity as an important part of the curriculum in England. In Scotland the *Curriculum for Excellence* policy aims to de-clutter and integrate the curriculum where possible so that pupils become “successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors” (SEED, 2004). In the USA, Ken Robinson, senior advisor for education policy at the Getty Foundation, argues that creativity plays a vital role in a modern economy, and one that education policy makers ignore at their peril (ECS, 2005). Moreover, the American Teacher Awards (ATA) and their English equivalent
consistently emphasise the importance of the all-important intellectual creativity that inspirational teachers foster.

The concerns about coherence, engagement and creativity mean that the UK and USA now look with interest at countries such as Sweden, Finland and Norway where the education system seems more in tune with pupils’ interests and concerns. In this new climate, it is timely to re-examine Storyline and to consider how it can contribute to a creative, engaging and responsive language and literacy curriculum.

**Creativity and Engagement**

Questions about how to describe and ‘capture’ the core features of creativity and engagement abound. Quite rightly, teachers, managers and policy-makers want to know what is central and important in terms of curriculum content, design and pedagogy as well as the type of policy frameworks that promote creativity and engagement. One major problem is how to reconcile the principles of creativity with competing demands about accountability, standards and centrally-determined curriculum priorities.

Studies show that creativity and pupil engagement are linked; in creative classrooms, children show persistence and engagement with their learning. The PISA study of international reading attainment found that pupil engagement in reading impacts strongly on attainment, and that high engagement mitigated the attainment-effects of socio-economic status (Kirsch et al., 2002). Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) have identified at least 12 dimensions of motivation for reading. Extrinsic motivation requires external rewards for reading activities, whether from teachers, peers or computers - whereas intrinsic motivation comes from within the pupil and the new information or emotional satisfaction of reading is reward enough. Internally motivated readers believe that reading is valuable in its own right, and because of this “embrace the goal of reading well and reading widely”. A third dimension of motivation is self-efficacy which Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) argue helps to sustain pupils’ efforts on new skills and tasks. Pupils with high self-efficacy have confidence and self-belief so that they tackle difficult texts and tasks believing that they will be able to meet and overcome any problems they meet on the way. Those with low self-efficacy tend to assume tasks will be beyond their capabilities; they have a “can’t do” rather than “can do” attitude.