

Stories for Thinking

DEVELOPING CRITICAL LITERACY THROUGH THE USE OF NARRATIVE

Robert Fisher

A central thesis then begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal ... a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their authorship; I can only answer the question about 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior questions, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'... Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way of giving us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. (MacIntyre 1984, p201)

Oh I get it, we're not supposed to read the story we're supposed to think about it.

(7 year old child)

Stories have long been seen as a natural stimulus for discussion, investigation and problem-solving in UK primary schools. The Stories for *Thinking* programme is aimed at developing the thinking, learning and language skills of primary-aged children through thinking together about stories. The central focus of the programme is on the use of narrative as a stimulus for developing higher order literacy and thinking skills. One of the key aims of education in schools is to teach literacy - the ability to read and write. These skills are seen as basic, and form along with numeracy the central thrust of the 'back to basics' movement in English education. These are often seen as low level skills, to be taught through repetitive and low level exercises. From this view of literacy it is easy to understand the view that teachers of young children do not need extensive training. Indeed the recent short-course school-based teacher training courses for teachers of young children can be seen as a product of this view of literacy-as-training. However we can look at literacy in a broader and more productive way. Literacy can be seen as the ability to think, reason and communicate within a particular social context.

The practices of literacy and ways of developing literacy depend in part on the social conditions in which they are learned. In certain societies, for example when the goal of teaching is to learn the Koran in Arabic, the appropriate mode of instruction would be memorisation. In preparing children to be full participants in a literate, democratic and multicultural society we need to focus on the ways of thinking that are involved in the many uses of literacy in school and in the community. These uses require abilities

of reflection, of critical thinking, investigation and of problem solving. On this view there is no right or wrong kind of literacy - only practices that are more or less responsive to the needs of a particular culture. Indeed different literary practices may co-exist, for example in our culture the use of rote memorisation techniques may be a very efficient means for young children to learn phonic sounds or letter names. The technical side of learning, what the Greeks called *techne*, can be promoted through systematic instruction to give children rich domains of knowledge and skills. But we also need teaching that enables students to develop higher order thinking, the practical wisdom that the Greeks called *phronesis*, that will help them tackle the problems of learning and of life.

If one definition of quality in teaching is fitness for purpose, then for different purposes (and for different children) we need different teaching strategies, different approaches to literacy. If one of our purposes is to invite children into the club of critical thinkers, then we need to show children models, and introduce children into contexts where higher-order thinking can take place. And we have strong pedagogical reasons for doing so. Studies of the most literate and able children show that they have aspects of knowledge and skills or competencies that less successful learners do not have. These include:

- knowledge of literary forms, purposes and genre, including metalinguistic knowledge;
- skills and strategies for processing literary knowledge, including the ability to question, interrogate and discuss narrative texts;
- ability to apply and transfer their learning and knowledge to other contexts.

The Philosophy in Primary Schools (PIPS) research project on philosophy with children undertaken in London schools in 1993/6 used stories as a focus for three elements of language learning: the teaching of metalinguistic elements, for example by introducing children to the language of discourse, reasoning and argument; the teaching of how to interrogate and process narrative information, literary and visual; and the transfer of higher-order thinking processes through critical discussion in all areas of the curriculum. *The Stories for Thinking programme* aims at providing the communicative contexts for developing these skills essential to the development of critical literacy.

Narrative comprehension is one of the earliest powers to appear in the mind of the young child, and is one of the most widely used ways of organising human experience. The use of stories has long been recognised as a valuable means for stimulating philosophical discussion with young children in the primary classroom. The power of stories reside in their ability to create possible worlds as objects of intellectual inquiry. Stories liberate us from the here-and-now, they are intellectual constructions but they are also life-like. They are intellectually challenging, but also embedded in human concerns.

All the great stories of humanity have the capacity to relate to the concerns and needs of people at different stages of development. They are 'polysemic', that is they have within them layers or levels of meaning and significance which we become aware of as we grow in experience and insight. We can find ourselves returning to them again and again, seeking fresh insight and nourishment as life persuades us to reformulate and rethink those basic philosophical questions about what we know and believe, about

right and wrong, about human relationships and the self which are of relevance to people at all ages and stages of life. One reason we relate to stories is that they can be metaphors for our own life. Human life can be regarded as a story, a narrative structured in which everyone has a part. In existentialist terms the fact of death provides narrative structure to life. To understand the narrative structure of stories, or of human lives, requires more than the exercise of human reason, it requires what Egan calls 'the other half of the child' namely imagination. When Dewey argued for education through experience, he envisaged such experience including the imaginative experience to be gained from stories. But what is a story, and what experience should be gained from stories?

Egan argues that a defining characteristic of a story is that it is a 'linguistic unit that can ultimately fix the affective meaning of the events that compose it.' In a well-crafted story our affective responses are orchestrated by the events in the narrative. It is this 'affective meaning' that Egan sees as the unique characteristic of a story plot. One reason why stories have this affective power is that stories have, as Egan says, a crucial feature which life and history lack, that they have beginnings and ends and so can fix meanings to events. Stories are in a sense 'given' in a way that life, with its messiness and incompleteness is not. Unlike the complexity of everyday events, stories end. What makes them stories is that their ending completes (in a rational sense) or satisfies (in an affective sense) whatever was introduced at the beginning and elaborated in the middle. As Kafka said: 'the meaning of life is that it stops'. Or as the Greeks had it: 'Call no man happy until he is dead.'

What Egan is referring to is the simple traditional story form. His analysis works less well, and needs to be supplemented, when considering both more complex narratives which mix historical and other elements in fictional/factual forms, and also the attenuated narratives of Lipman's philosophical novels. However the affective response can be seen to be characteristic of story, and of every aesthetic experience. A good story evokes what Pierce called an 'intellectual sympathy, a sense that here is a feeling that one can comprehend, a reasonable feeling'. Bettelheim said of fairy stories: 'A child's choices are based, not so much on right versus wrong, as who arouses his sympathy, and who his antipathy'. For Egan the affective power of stories lies in the binary opposites such as love/hate, life/death, hope/despair, good/bad, true/false embodied in the most powerful of stories, such as traditional myths and fairy tales. These binary opposites act as structural devices, syntactical elements in the underlying grammar of stories and provide reference points for meaning.

Stories are not only powerful in the affective domain, but also provide potentially complex challenges for cognitive processing. Since a story contains many different elements, objects and relationships, which unfold in a specific sequence of events, for a child it can be the most complex object of thought in the child's experience. For a young child to grasp and digest a story requires repeated acts of focal attention and efforts of understanding. The child's assimilation of the story requires a complex labour of attention and thought, and is the product of innumerable acts of focal attention to the story as a whole and its different parts, and to the child's affective responses to the story. For the young child the story is a piece of reality on which the child can rely, which is perhaps why getting the story right and hearing it repeated is so important. Later the child learns that stories can be made, changed and recreated in different forms. This issue of re-telling and re-constructing stories is one element of the *Stories for Thinking* approach. Part of the cognitive challenge comes from not only making sense of the narra-

tive elements of the story but also the various possible relations between the story and reality. Through interrogating a narrative we can come to learn more about the story, but in a philosophical sense we may also come to learn more about the world and about ourselves.

WHAT STORIES TO USE?

Story materials and texts suitable for philosophical inquiry

The following kinds of stories are being used in this research project into philosophy with young children in west London schools:

1. Philosophical novels

The first philosophical novel that Matthew Lipman wrote was Harry *Stottlemeier's Discovery*, published in 1974, which became the foundation out of which the Philosophy for Children curriculum was created. This was one of the Lipman texts chosen for use in the school-based elements of the Philosophy in Primary Schools (PIPS) project, as abridged and adapted for use in Britain by Roger Sutcliffe (1993) for children aged 11-13 years. The other Lipman novel used was *Pixie* which was a focus for work with children aged 8-10 years.

Lipman identifies three requirements he considers essential for texts suitable for philosophical inquiry - literary acceptability, psychological acceptability and intellectual acceptability. Of literary acceptability Lipman suggests that the literary quality of the text should be 'passable'. Judged by this criteria many teachers and students involved in the project felt that Lipman's novels provided good starting points for philosophical discussion but lacked sufficient literary merit to sustain student interest over time. Lipman argues that it is the lack of discursive literary elements which gives the novels their clear intellectual focus. He looks forward to a time when major writers would consider it a challenge to write textbooks for children. The most that he would claim for his own novels is that they are 'passable' in terms of literary interest.

Psychological acceptability is seen by Lipman to relate to the age-appropriateness of the story. He says of psychological acceptability that the response to the Philosophy for Children programme shows that children of all ages find complex ideas such as true, fair, good, right and person interesting as issues to discuss. We found in our use of Stories for Thinking that some narrative material was age-specific, but that some stories could be used for philosophical inquiry with children of any age.

Intellectual acceptability relates to the problematic nature of the text. For Lipman a dialogical text, made up of constructed conversations, can contain ambiguity, innuendo, irony, and many other qualities that other prose lacks. Constructed conversations, as Plato and other philosophers have found, provide opportunities for intellectual challenge. Lipman's novels are special for they provide models of conversational inquiry and thoughtfulness, seeded with philosophical puzzles. Can other kinds of narrative material provide similar kinds of intellectual challenge?

2. Traditional stories

The telling of folk tales and fairy tales is a communicative act that crosses the boundaries of time and culture. Their function has been to entertain but also to educate as a vehicle for knowledge, feelings, thoughts and imaginings. Fairy stories have a key role to play in children's social cognition and developing theories of mind, particularly in certain tales like Rumpelstiltskin which is complex in terms of its recursive structure, its internal state, vocabulary and its metacognitive language.

The purpose of literature, like the purpose of education, should be to help us find meaning in our lives, in particular to answer questions that are essentially philosophical - 'Who am I? Why am I here? What can I be?' Fairy tales offer new dimensions to the child's imagination which would be impossible for children to discover truly on their own. The message of fairy tales can be summed up as: if you have courage and persist you can overcome any obstacle to achieve your heart's desire. Discussing the obstacles and problems encountered by characters in fairy tales can help children understand and overcome the obstacles and problems they may face in their own lives. But it can be argued that traditional stories contain messages that entertain children rather than liberate them. A mode of oppression is built into many traditional stories, such as those of Grimm and Anderson, which limits imaginative thinking. This oppression takes the form in many stories of children experiencing some form of abuse - such as being kidnapped, abandoned or persecuted. Feminist critics argue against the stereotyping of girls in traditional tales, and that the passivity of female characters provides poor role models. What critics of fairy tales alert us to is the need to develop a critical response to traditional tales - and to broaden the range of children's literary experience.

The content of many traditional tales may be problematical, and strategies that involve the simple retelling may not encourage children to think critically about the stories and the messages they contain. Stories pose problems of interpretation, and in a sense reading is never completed, but is constantly under review and open to change. Stories are ideal for critical and dialogical inquiry, and as a way in to the criticism both of narrative and of cultural forms. Many modern stories and picture books challenge cultural stereotypes and conventional adult views of the world. A Community of Inquiry may provide the framework children need to encourage attention to linguistic meanings, and to a search for general principles to explain specific events in the narrative and to challenge the story stereotypes being offered. Teachers do this by asking, and encouraging children to ask questions about: What does the story say (literal meaning), and what do the messages of the story say (symbolic interpretation)? We have found that traditional tales and other forms of fiction can extend the canon of texts used to develop critical response through philosophical discussion. Some of these stories and discussion plans will be found in the first publication from the project: *Stories for Thinking* (Nash Pollock, 1996)

3. Children's fiction

Lipman argues against the use of existing children's literature when teaching philosophy to children. He distinguishes between children's need for literal meaning (scientific explanation), symbolic meaning (the kinds to be found in fairy-tales, fantasy and folklore) and philosophical meaning which is

neither literal or symbolic but is essentially metaphysical, logical or ethical. Children's fiction is suitable he suggests for literal and symbolic, but not for philosophical inquiry which is best facilitated through 'philosophical novels'. However, much of the best of children's fiction includes metaphysical themes such as time, space and human identity; logical themes to do with informal reasoning and the interpretation of meaning; and ethical themes to do with the rightness of actions and moral judgements. It may be that Lipman's novels express these themes in a more expository way, but at the expense of the motivating and imaginatively nourishing qualities of the best of children's fiction.

There is a sense in which any fictional text can serve as a basis for philosophical discussion. At its best reading a story is a way of discussing what might happen, to ask 'what if' in the open dialogue of speech, or the inner dialogue of imagination. Reading creates a mental space for thinking. But it is the quality of thinking that should concern us. To read is to think about meaning, but as any reader of Enid Blyton or Agatha Christie can attest, such a process can be enjoyed at a fairly automatic and unreflective level. If to read a book is, in a sense, imaginatively to recreate or rewrite it then we need to expose children to the most challenging forms of fiction. We also need invite them to become critical thinkers by providing opportunities to discuss and extend the meanings to be found in texts.

Narrative and argument are inter-dependent. Stories often contain hidden argument. To understand a Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie we need to go through the reasoning behind the events in the story to explain the conclusions to ourselves. Likewise all good fictions stimulate mental acts such as supposing, guessing and judging. If we restrict children to the inner voice of their own private judgements then we limit the opportunities for mental response that good texts offer. Reading is not necessarily over once the text is finished, but can continue through reflection, interpretation, discussion and creative activity. Text talk should aim to deepen understanding both of what is read, and of the world. Discussion in a community of inquiry can help make reading a social event, a publicly-shared thinking about reading. But can a fiction not written for philosophic purposes be used for philosophy? If so, what fiction is suitable?

Both classic children's fiction like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Wizard of Oz* and *The Happy Prince*, and modern fiction like *The Iron Man* by Ted Hughes and *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder have been used to generate thinking and philosophical discussion with older children.

4. Picture books

Lipman's novels contain no pictures. He explains that he has resisted putting illustrations in the children's books because he feels that to do so is to do for children what they should do for themselves, namely provide the imagery that accompanies reading and interpretation. It is true that pictures in a book can seem discontinuous with the text. This may be because the verbal and the visual are two distinct forms of intelligence, and need to be processed in different parts of the brain. This discontinuity may, as Lipman suggests, be due to the illustration being an impoverished representation of what we can visualise in our 'mind's eye'. However pictures that are of quality and well-integrated in the text can add dimensions of meaning to a story.

One reason why philosophers, including Lipman, eschew illustration is that pictures are non-propositional. Pictures do not contain within them propositional units of meaning the way sentences do. But meaning is not something that only words and sentences have. Pictures demand interpretation, and the active construction of meaning. Meanings are not 'given' but must be re-constructed in the mind of the viewer (as in a different medium the meaning of a text must be created in the mind of the reader). In a picture book such as *Would you rather ?* by John Bumingham the text shows one kind of meaning and pictures another. The combination of two kinds of interpretation creates its own challenge. Many picture books prise open the gap between the words and the pictures, forcing the reader/viewer to work hard to forge a conceptual and narrative relationship between them.

For young children, and for occasional use with older students, picture books can provide a powerful stimulus for philosophical inquiry.

5. Curriculum-based narrative

All curriculum subjects contain narrative elements which can provide a stimulus for philosophical discussion. The *Stories for Thinking* material include stories related to themes in history, geography, art, science and religious education. Research is currently being undertaken on developing mathematical thinking through classroom discussion, and a resource: *Maths for Thinking*, is in preparation.

6. Poetry

'Poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom' said the American poet Robert Frost. Poetry has the benefit of concision. Metaphors, meanings and images are often compressed. If poems comprise 'the best words in the best order' the challenge for the reader remains: What do the words mean? What story is the poem telling? What problems does the poem pose?

One element of the *Stories for Thinking* programme is *Poems for Thinking* (in press), a book which offers poems and guidelines for critical discussion in a community of inquiry.

7. Pictures and photos

Works of art, or reproductions of works of art such as photos from colour magazines, and popular art forms such as cartoons can serve as a basis for community of inquiry. In terms of art education the practice of art is insufficient to gain a full experience of art. We want children to take on the dual roles of practising artist and critic. If young people are truly to come to know, the uncritical assimilation of information and the unthinking application of skills is not enough. Pupils need to think for themselves, deeply and personally, about their aesthetic experiences: what they are hearing, seeing, and doing.

Teachers need to provide sessions solely for discussion of artworks, and a growing literature on the need to develop intelligence through discussion of aesthetic experience. The Stories for *Thinking* programme will include a Pictures for *Thinking* resource to help teachers and children engage in close observation, interpretation and critical discussion about works art.

8. Artifacts and objects

Any object or artifact can be of narrative interest to the enquiring mind. Someone once said that if you were to know everything there was to be known about any one object you would come to know every there was to be known about every object. Any object, either natural or designed can become an object of intellectual inquiry. What questions can be posed about a chosen object? Which of these questions is philosophical? The Stories for *Thinking* programme will include advice on ways to use objects, products and artifacts as a stimulus for reflection and inquiry.

9. Drama, role play and first-hand experience

Drama, role play and first-hand experience, such as a visit or the witnessing of an experiment can be a stimulus for reflection and inquiry. The Stories for *Thinking* programme aims to include a resource for teachers on Drama for *Thinking*.

10. Music

Research is currently being undertaken in London schools on ways of teaching music through critical inquiry and discussion, exploring personal and narrative responses to music. A doctoral student, Sara Liptai, based at the Centre for Research in Teaching Thinking at Brunel University is researching ways of using music for thinking and aesthetic inquiry.

11. TV and video

TV and video provide an endless diet of unreflective entertainment. The use of video clips can be a stimulus for critical discussion with children in communities of media study, with the aim of helping children to be active interrogators, not only of educational film and video, but also of the dominant forms of popular culture, such as adverts, TV 'soaps' and popular films.

12. Factual narrative

Various non-fiction forms of narrative can be of philosophical interest, for example popular accounts of the Great Mysteries of the World, and ways of using these are discussed in Stories for *Thinking*.

Any story or book that children read can become a story for thinking if a teacher or reading partner follows the story up with questions and themes for discussion. In *Stories for Thinking* each story is linked to a key theme with questions for discussion. These are not only found to be useful in themselves but offer models for the way any reading with children can be enriched by questioning and discussion. Many of the best questions will come from the children themselves.

The following were questions raised by a class of 7-9 year olds having their first *Stories for Thinking* community of inquiry session, after reading the story of Gelert. The first contribution was a comment:

The story doesn't sound too good if you're a vegetarian. (Luke)

Why is the story so miserable? (Robert) Why is the story so bloodthirsty? (Kayleigh) How did the baby fall out of its cradle? (Kevin) Why didn't Prince Llewellyn look around the room for the baby? (Francis)

Why didn't the baby wake up? (Eleanor) Why was the story made up? (Luke) What is the point of the story? (Sara)

Why did the prince kill the dog before looking for the baby? (Alex)

Why are there different versions of the same story? (Daniel)

Where were they in the castle? (Harpreet) Why did the prince jump to conclusions? (Michael)

Why did the prince have to go hunting? (Darenjit)

What was he hunting for? (Harpreet)

How did the wolf get inside the castle? (Ricky and Brett)

Why did the prince kill the dog if it was his favourite animal? (Robert)

Can you bring people (or dogs) back from the dead? (David)

The questions are fairly typical for this age group. On this occasion about half the class asked a question, some children asking more than one. The teacher might then have asked the children to choose, e.g., by voting, which question they wished to discuss. On this occasion the teacher chose what she thought was the most interesting and philosophical of the questions, Luke's question: 'Why was the story made up?' She began by asking Luke to explain why he asked this question. As the discussion progressed the children discussed the difference between stories, myths and legends, they talked of people who made up stories and what makes a good story, and how you might find out whether a story is true. Towards the end of the 45 minute session the children chose Michael's question: 'Why did the prince jump to conclusions?' Michael explained why the question puzzled him: 'Why do people jump to conclusions without thinking first?', and the class began debating the motivation behind the actions of the central character, and examples of when they acted without thinking. They came to agree that 'Stop, and think' was a useful rule to remember, but hard to put into practice. By the end of the lesson there were still many more questions to discuss. These were

displayed in the class for another time, and these and other questions became the subject of their writing in their Thinking Books.

As the children get more experienced in the process they will ask more questions, and their insights in discussion will delight and surprise you. The following are examples of the 26 questions raised by a class aged 9-11 years after hearing the story of The Willow Pattern (Stories for *Thinking*, p33). Almost every child in this class had a question and the teacher stopped writing questions when he ran out of board space! Here are some examples:

Why is the daughter so important to the father? (Gaurav)

Why was the Willow Tree so important? What did it stand for? (Faizal)

If the father loved the daughter so much why did he make her unhappy? (Chetan)

Could someone really change into a bird? (Ben and Bobby)

Shouldn't you be allowed to marry who you want to? (Stacey)

Is it a true story or not? (Ronald)

Who were the gods, and what did they look like? (Anil)

Who is telling the story? (Asim)

Any one of these questions, and many others suggested by the children, are likely to prove fruitful for discussion. In the early stages it may be better for the teacher to choose a promising question from the board for discussion. From the above lists of children's questions which would you choose as a starting point for discussion?

What did the teachers involved in the project think are the benefits of Stories for *Thinking*? Benefits identified by teachers include the following:

- 'It is good training for children in raising questions, not only English but science relies on children generating questions - a skill they find hard'.
- 'Children have learnt to respect others, and have developed the confidence to put forward their own opinions and beliefs'.
- 'Answering questions by putting forward theories and hypotheses is not only intellectually stimulating, it is also psychologically 'safe' for them, when they do it in a community of inquiry'.

One teacher reflecting on changes brought about by lessons using Stories for *Thinking* identified the following changes in her class:

- self esteem - 'children are proud of their ability to discuss important and difficult issues seriously'

- listening skills - 'children are more prepared to listen to and respect each other'
- higher order thinking - 'children enjoy the challenge of discussing difficult questions'
- questioning - 'children are more willing to ask questions in all lessons, and to seek answers to problems'
- communication - 'children are more willing to talk and contribute to discussion and build on each other's ideas'

What do children think they learn from philosophy? Responses of course will vary, from Tom (aged 12) who said, 'Philosophy is a good exercise, it is like doing PE for the mind', to Jake (aged 14) who responded, 'Philosophy is the missing element in the curriculum because it is the only subject that helps you to think better in every subject', and Ann (aged 9) who said, 'I think philosophy makes you think more because it gives you time to think'.

It is this time to think that we all need, as adults and as children.

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THE STORIES FOR THINKING PROGRAMME

Developer:	Robert Fisher
Goal:	To develop thinking, language and learning skills across the curriculum, through philosophical discussion
Sample skills:	Concept-formation, inquiry, reasoning and communication skills, thinking for oneself and in cooperation with others
Assumptions:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching thinking through philosophical discussion can enrich all areas of the curriculum • Teaching thinking is best achieved through creating a community of inquiry in the classroom • Stories and narrative material can provide a stimulus for philosophical discussion across the curriculum
Intended Audience:	Children aged 7-14 years
Process:	Teacher/children read and discuss narrative stimulus such as story, poem or picture. This is followed by discussion of questions and issues raised by children or teacher. Extension activities review and relate the discussion to curriculum goals
Time:	One or two hours per week
Publications:	Stories for Thinking (1996), Games for Thinking (1997) and Poems for Thinking (in press). Other resources in preparation. Published by Nash Pollock Publishing, Oxford, England
Source:	Centre for Research in Teaching Thinking, Brunel University, 300 St.

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