



Dr. sc. Ladislav Bognar, Professor
Teacher Training Faculty Osijek
E-mail: ladislav.bognar@os.t-com.hr

Leader of the project “Development of creativity in lifelong education of teachers”, which assembled numerous cooperatives from schools and Education and teacher training agency, University teachers and students. He has been working systematically on development of interculturalism, peace education, methodics of education and the game in class. He is the author of the university study books Didactics and Methodics of Education and numerous scientific and professional works and reviews in the field of pedagogy.

Storytelling and puppetry in higher education

„Everyone said it was impossible in our school. Then came the one who did not know that and she did it. (Meyer)

Abstract

Storytelling and puppetry in education – yes, but in early schooling only; in secondary school or higher education – impossible, we cannot make kindergarten of them. Such comments are still frequently made by those who are used to the traditional way of teaching and learning, which supposedly must be boring. Nowadays, when our knowledge about more successful ways of learning is expended and the traditional lecture-based teaching is considered to be the least successful method, the perception of this issue has changed.

Both storytelling and puppetry relate to our emotional side which interacts with reason and opens new possibilities for learning. Therefore, the question is no longer whether or not to use these benefits in education, but how to do that in order to make them accepted by student teachers and purposeful in class. This is what the article explores.

Key words: storytelling, puppetry, higher education, creativity.

Introduction

It is common to use both – puppetry and storytelling in primary schools classes, but as far as secondary school and higher education are concerned this turns out to be quite a provocative and generally disapproved idea. This article deals with education in general, but more weight is given to higher education, namely future teachers’ education in elementary education as well as in subject based education, but all other forms of education are also in focus of this study. Accordingly, the subjects of this study are not art classes such as literature or puppetry, where storytelling and puppetry are the subjects of the study, but the classes where they are used as teaching tools. Both – storytelling and puppetry should serve the realization of educational tasks of those classes, which is not always easy to accomplish as we deal with the so-called indirect teaching. Both – stories and puppets – are attention grabbers, they stir

imagination and creativity, but the art of teaching is to use these tools in order to make one's own teaching practice more successful.

Theoretical framework

Theoretical framework for this approach lies in the theory of the left and right brain hemisphere http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lateralization_of_brain_function which argues that the simultaneous application of both hemispheres of our brain significantly increases our brain function efficiency. Though this theory has not been fully approved by neuroscientific studies, it has influenced many changes in education. The result is: listening to music while solving some intellectual assignments, writing mathematical tasks in colours, colouristic illustrations in study books, but also the use of storytelling and puppetry in classroom.

Eric Jansen (2005), who takes the results of modern neuroscientific studies as a starting point for his pedagogical efforts, says that a neuroscientist would tell us to stir the appropriate emotions in the process of learning by using all possible means. Hereby, emotions should be used as a part of learning and not as its supplement. He gives example of the use of music, game, drama, storytelling, but also all sorts of other activities that strongly stir emotions. (p 98) *"Affective side of learning is crucial in the interplay of our emotions, activities and cognition. There is no such thing as division between the brain and emotions; emotions, thoughts and learning are connected."* (p. 89).

Theoretical framework can be also found in the humanistic theory which asserts that the man is a creative being, being of imagination who realizes himself/herself as a potential human being, but who, through stories and art as special forms of freedom, anticipates the changes. Many things that humans have accomplished firstly existed only in stories: in stories man could fly, travel to other planets and create the light or magic potions that cured deadly diseases. Hence Herbert Marcuse (1973) sees a subversive role in stories and art as they do not only speak of what is happening but, to a far greater extent, of what might be.

Storytelling

Stories are very powerful and are not always harmless. For years and centuries we have been telling stories about the dangerous wolf so the wolf has now become almost extinct. Europeans were brought up on stories about the witches who died burnt in flames and the women were burnt in flames from the 13th to the 18th century. Jerome Bruner says the following about the issue:

„It is impossible that we cannot understand ourselves and our stumblings better. Poison gases and Fat Bertha might be the lethal fruits of science, but the urge to use them has come from our stories. Should not we understand their power better, see how stories and historical accounts correspond and what is there about them that inspires people to live together and hurt or kill each other?" (Bruner, 2000, p. 100)¹

¹ More detailed account in: Bogнар, L. (2001.) Fairytale in peace education, Collection of works from the international scientific conference "Golden days 3" Fairytales from the ancient times until today, University J.J.

However, here we want to discuss the stories which are free from hate and intolerance, stories that advocate kindness and stimulate personal growth and development. There are many such stories; they only need to be found. But we can create them ourselves. These may be our personal experiences. Students often ask me to tell them about the days when I worked as a teacher, about adventures I had with my pupils, my wanderings and blunders, but also about successful quests, about the fears I had as a young teacher and how I got rid of them. They probably see themselves in those situations and think of what they would do, thus enhancing the readiness to cope with the challenges awaiting them. These can also be the book chapters that deal with some growing-up issues as well as descriptions of certain school situations. I have been collecting these stories for years and they really do seem like a treasure box of pedagogical adventures. Some of these stories you can see on my web page: <http://ladislav-bognar.net/drupal/node/53>.

Inge Eidsvåg (2007) places storytelling in his 10 teaching commandments. According to him, stories have created the world and they represent a link between people from all times. All the cultures have their basic stories:

„When we listen to stories, a miracle happens: words wander through the brain labyrinth and become images. In front of us we see what is being told...Through stories we learn to see with our eyes closed. But something else is also happening: we become fellow-travellers and fellow-creators. Stories develop in us; they are being formed according to our inner space. And the consciousness receives them, increases and decreases them, gives them colours, hides them and forgets them.” (Eidsvåg, 182.)

What is storytelling? According to the authors Wallace A./Mishina L. (2004) a story is the result of the favourable moment – our ability to express our experiences, attitudes, acknowledgments and emotions to others at the right time. This delicacy of situation mirrors itself in creation of the convenient atmosphere and the choice of the right moment to tell the story:

„Telling stories is a unique human experience which enables us to accept, through the language of the words, ourselves, others and the world, real and imaginary, to which we belong. Stories help us understand the world and our place in it as we all are made of stories: stories about us, our families, friends and colleagues, our community and our place in history” (page 31).

These authors deal with storytelling in higher education just like Abrahamson (1998) who argues that classes which are reduced to the transfer of information based on universal notions and generalisations cannot be successful since students are human beings who apart from reason have emotions as well.

„The best form of the classroom practice is not the simple use of didactic instruction. Exciting and attractive content which has meaning for its listeners is required. By using storytelling as a didactic tool, students and professors are equally inspired with the multitude of different options. It is important to bear in mind that students are complex beings, hence inspiration,

encouragement, satisfaction and fascination must be integrated within information in the educational practice which has meaning for pupils and will have a real and constant impact on their personal life and the society they interact with. We are more likely to remember information with emotional impact (p.2).

Listening to stories is almost as creative as storytelling. All of us have a unique experience of the story we hear as we in our imagination create characters, scenes where the story takes place, attaching our own values, wishes and wonderings to the story.

Good stories are like true art indeed, of a kind that enables creative participation of a listener. I remember when a storytelling troop from Germany came to visit: first, they drew us into the world of imagination with our eyes closed using a magical ball that produced quiet sounds while it was rolled in the hand. Our imagination created images of the characters, landscapes, relations, emotions of fear, suspense, but also those of joy and elation. Then they asked us to draw one of the images we saw. When we placed the drawings in a circle and everybody said something about his or her image, evidently all thirty of us had a different perception of the same story.

American author Lynn Dhority (1992) in his inspirational book on creative methods of learning speaks of metaphorical stories and gives an example of “Stories about Kristina” that deal with educational process perceived in a new and creative way. I use this story at the beginning of Didactics course which is essentially different from the classical and regular university education. New approach is personalised in the professor Kreatilov (Creatilov), and the old one in the professor Pedanter (Meticulous). The story has turned out to be useful even on the pedagogical-psychological course where older people return to university in order to educate themselves for work in vocational schools. They find themselves and their fears in this story, they are introduced to the processes of getting to know each other and gradual construction of mutual trust but also to different approaches of respective university professors.

When we use storytelling in education, the atmosphere for the storytelling should be well prepared. The story can be told, read, students can read it themselves. Sometimes I told this story with Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun (Claude Debussy) and I have noticed that the music enhanced the experience. This is followed by activities on the text. I am of opinion that analyses should be avoided as they often spoil the authentic experience.

Students should be enabled to express their experience of the story in forms such as movement, music, drawing, acting or dancing. <http://vimeo.com/3484546> I normally give this text to groups of students and I suggest they individually choose the way they will express their experience. This story can be followed by exploration of students’ attitudes, so a discussion can be organised, they can make a poster or organise a debate about the following issue: What is Kreatilov right about and what is Pedanter right about? The dialogue between them can be acted out. The conversation between them can be used later on for other didactic issues.

This turned out to be quite useful as some of the students have reservations regarding this approach to teaching as they are not used to it, and some of them are even defensive so these debates are highly beneficial.

Here is a sample of dialogue between Pedanter and Kreatilov about forms of curriculum. I apply this dialog in my course when a difference between the so-called “open” and “closed” curriculum needs to be explained:

Pedanter: Dear Colleague, the curriculum is a Holy Bible for teachers; they should read it all the time: before they go to sleep and before lunch, all the time, as everything is written here. Everything pupils need to know and how they should behave is written here, teachers do not need to think up anything since everything is written here.

Kreatilov: A teacher is not a postman with a huge leather bag delivering the curriculum to the pupils. Each topic, each class is a different story. That is a story waiting to be written, a drama waiting to be acted out. Teachers are not robots who obediently follow your ideas. And when things turn out to be different from what you have expected then you criticise teachers again telling them they are not professional and competent enough to carry out your wise ideas. You keep on forgetting that humans are creative beings and they cannot be obedient creators of other peoples’ ideas.

Pedanter: My dear colleague, a good curriculum is 90% of good classes. Here we have clearly defined tasks given in a way that they can be explicitly measured. Content is also clearly stated and the complete methodical and media equipment is given. In the end we ensured testing for the teachers so that they can independently see their achievements and mistakes. We ensured everything for our teachers and if they stick to that they cannot make a mistake.



Slika 1. Kreatilov

Kreatilov: When I worked as a teacher a fire broke out in our village and all the people from the village helped extinguishing the fire, even some children. The children were excited for days after that and there was no chance to follow the programme as there was no mention of the event. We were talking about it for days, we made drawings of the fire, conducted the research about it, made small projects, and we even sparked the initiative to build the better fire defence system as it had turned out that the fire engine was broken so the fire had to be extinguished with bare hands.



Slika 2. Pedanter

Pedanter: My dear colleague, those are the doomed ideas of the occasion-oriented teaching, abandoned long ago. We cannot base formal education on spontaneous pupils’ interest as those insights are not part of the systematic knowledge and are thoroughly useless. In addition, the world is a cruel place which requires a large number of information and as our well known pedagogue once said; the world needs heroes and not mum’s darlings and duckies.

Kreatilov: You know, I am for the curriculum, but an open one. This means that teachers should take things written in your curriculum as an orientation, but they should take care about pupils and their interest and needs, the environment they live in. Teachers are the creators of the real curriculum which is the real classroom practice, not some papers but the real life.

Pedanter: There is no such thing as “an open curriculum”, it was invented by those who do not know what the curriculum is. There is only the national curriculum obligatory for everyone and everyone must follow it. Where would it take us if everyone did what they liked in school?

Puppetry

These discussions between Kreatilov and Pedanter can be realized by using puppets that represent two characters from the story. This brings us to the use of puppetry in higher education. First idea came to me from Lynn Dhority (1992) who made the following account of his use of puppetry in the foreign language (German) classes:

„As I was completely unexperienced with puppetry I was afraid I would look foolish in front of my students or even worse, hurt them. But when I saw how Evelina Gateva successfully did this, I decided to give it a try and bring the puppet into the classroom... I am still happy I found strength and dared to enter this unknown area. Now regularly, between the third and the sixth period, after I make sure that the positive classroom dynamics is formed, I bring “Uncle Fritz” in the classroom. Students are happy to have additional entertainment in class. The puppet normally quickly creates the opportunity to develop spontaneous atmosphere of phantasy and gripping happening. Uncle Fritz is a somewhat bald seventy-year old Bavarian, adventurer, who loves “schnaps” and women, convinced of being younger in his heart than others. His attractive and humorous anecdotes and looking for advice and opinion, very quickly create a platform for establishing personal contacts with almost everyone in the class. The number of different ways of interaction with the puppet is only limited by our imagination...Puppets stir imaginary world in students and professors and if this dimension is deliberately developed it can become a very precious source of stimulation for learning. (Dhority, 118,119.)

My years-long experience with puppetry in my teaching practice has been very positive, but I reckon that it should not be used excessively (as anything else) and it is equally important to introduce them at an appropriate moment. Introducing puppets at the beginning, while students are not used to the creative approach to teaching, may be the reason for the negative attitude towards this approach. The puppet that I introduce the first at my introductory lessons is neither Kreatilov nor Pedanter; the first one is “Janko the Magician” whom I describe as my collaborator and friend and I present him at the end of the first semester. I tell my students that he is a magician because he makes one’s eyes shine, lips smile and fills one’s heart with joy. I normally animate him having him whisper on my ear what to ask my students, and sometimes he alone raises some issues connected with the topic of lesson. Janko can be given to students so that they tell him what there is interesting for him in that day’s lesson. We use him at the end of the lesson for the evaluation purposes, by having students ask him how satisfied he was and what he liked or he asks the students the same things. It is also possible that a student who gets the puppet says Janko’s commentary on the lesson.

I have notices that puppets positively affect the lesson in several ways:

- ✚ The puppet has a magical power to attract attention. If the class gets noisy and attention is poor, when a puppet is raised it is normally followed by silence and everyone looking at the puppet.
- ✚ A puppet creates an atmosphere that stimulates creative play. Serious faces accustomed to boredom in classroom suddenly become shiny and a new situation of successful learning is initiated.
- ✚ Every teaching practice needs some anticipated events that will come as refreshment and significant change in teaching. The puppet is an ideal tool for this.
- ✚ The puppet in students' hands suddenly stirs their imagination and a creative performance takes place. Students often have remarks that Janko the Magician has made their eyes shine, lips smile and filled their hearts with joy.
- ✚ We are always surprised by what is happening in the classes when we use a puppet. Students who rarely talk in public often start speaking, in their original way, with the puppet.

Wallace/Mishina (2004.) conducted a research on the use of puppetry and came to similar conclusions. They studied the puppetry use in a primary school when a puppet is used by a teacher and by pupils respectively. In the experimental group they used puppetry in the classroom and in the control group they did not. They obtained significant differences in comparison to the controlled group regarding children's attention and involvement during the teaching-learning process. The children were reading to their puppets or they were writing compositions together, they were teaching their puppets following the example of their teacher. Furthermore, authors emphasise the benefits of this teaching practice for the teachers:



Slika 3.
Čarobnjak Janko

„As teachers we thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to communicate with and instruct our students using the unique language of puppetry. We found that with puppets in hand, we were much more dramatic and entertaining teachers and, in turn, our students really appreciated sharing those learning opportunities with us. It was mutually beneficial.“
(Wallace/Mishina 2004. p.6.)

As far as higher education is concerned puppetry can be used in several ways. Following the distinction made by the above quoted authors we can refer to the possibilities when the puppet is in teacher's hands and in students' hands.

Generally speaking at the beginning of the course in the agreement stage, the puppet is mostly in teacher's hands, in the realization stage it can be evenly in students' hands and teacher's hands, and finally, in the evaluation stage it is in students' hands <http://vimeo.com/3497350>.

Teacher can use the puppet at the beginning of the lecture to draw students' attention, to provoke their interest for the theme and the puppet can only say that she/he is interested in today's interesting work. The puppet can only show up to stimulate curiosity about what is following. So snakes and giraffes puppets can be used as introductory tools for violent and non-violent communication, personified as a "snake" and "giraffe" language.

In the realization stage puppets can have a triggering role during presentations since they come as refreshment and relate to some other spheres of our personality. Students can animate the puppet by asking questions or by giving a short commentary on the lesson's topic. A shorter dialogue can be acted out between two puppets, Kreatilov and Pedanter or Snake and Giraffe. In order to illustrate violent and non-violent conflict solution I sometimes apply the story "Two bucks on the log" as a shadow theatre using overhead projector on which I place the characters cut out of paper.

However, at this stage students have far more opportunities to use puppets. To make that possible, it is necessary to create an atmosphere that stimulates creative game, and when that happens possibilities are unlimited. Students are not only able to act out certain monologues or dialogues, play some shorter adventures or misadventures, but they can also independently create puppets – something where they can express special creativity. My experience is that there should not be too many puppets in the classroom. I normally, in the course of one subject, use one puppet or a couple of them a few times. By doing so, a puppet remains refreshment.



Figure 4. Shadow theatre – Conversation between the board and the tape recorder about the media in classes.

Shadow theatre, as a form of puppet theatre, has turned out to be a very simple technique, but very stimulating one for the creativity of students. I was quite surprised at how this technique stimulated the creation of characters and stories that deal with conflict among students of pre-

school education and interesting dialogues about the media in classes among students from Teacher training college. Everything that could be said about the media in a stereotypical, hence, dull way, and students expressed in an original and humorous way, grabbing the audience's attention.

In the evaluation stage puppetry has again turned out to be an effective tool. We are doing this by having each group think up the way to use a puppet for an evaluation of that day's lesson. At the end of the workshop, at which they learn Snake's and Giraffe's language, puppets can be passed from hand to hand, so the impression of the lesson is to be expressed in one of the two ways depending on the puppet they receive.

Conclusion

Today we know that storytelling and puppetry are important for the classroom practice which strives to be efficient, interesting and oriented at the whole person. Prejudices that these two are for small children, and that boring lectures are for serious people, are not perceived as valid anymore among people who are dealing with the theory of classroom practice. However, this does not imply that there are not any unsolved issues. The basic issue is how to make storytelling and puppetry purposeful in the teaching-learning process. The second issue is how to implement them in teaching if it is not a common practice and how the students will accept it. There are no ready answers for either one. It is about the personal competence and creativity of the teacher, who must be aware of all the circumstances and able to create an atmosphere in which it will be both – possible and effective. For this teaching method, as for all others, the rule is that it is not a method that educates, but a person. One teacher will successfully use both –puppetry and storytelling, and the other one using the same story and the same puppet, will not. Through the story and through the puppet, the teacher who is using them is sending a message even when students are those who create the story or animate the puppet. It is about the art of teaching, and that is in the hands of the teacher.

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