



A Personal Storytelling Course to Promote English-Medium University Success

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Abstract

A second-language student's progression to English-medium tertiary education presents many challenges, from building new social networks to coping with demanding academic courses [1]. This paper argues for the promotion of storytelling, specifically personal narrative, as a general education subject for English-medium universities. Storytelling, both an ancient art and modern science, is a worthy subject of study with a wide array of real-world applications such as public speaking, marketing, teaching, and job interviews. As a classroom activity, storytelling addresses students' urgent need to boost their English proficiency to succeed in their studies. A course which teaches storytelling principles and theories and develops storytelling and speaking skills can promote effective learning of language and communication skills. The social interaction which occurs as students listen to others' stories, give feedback, and learn from more proficient peers promotes cognitive growth [2]. Reflection of learning is easily integrated into the curriculum [3] as a key stage of the experiential learning process [4]. Repetitive speaking practice can aid in overcoming anxiety and building fluency and confidence. Such a course can enhance students' language skills, improve their affect, and act as a comforting gateway to the rigors of academic life.

Keywords: *storytelling; personal narrative; general education; language learning; engagement; experiential learning*

1. The second-language learning context and general education

A student's entrance to university is a significant milestone in life, but also a challenging transition. In the Hong Kong context, English is a second or third language for many undergraduates who experienced Chinese medium-of-instruction in their primary and secondary education, where their previous English instruction focused on passing high-stakes university entrance examinations. As Hong Kong universities primarily use an English medium-of-instruction in lectures and assessments, incoming students may not be well prepared for undergraduate writing, with deficiencies related to language, text organisation, and generally weak English [1]. The struggle to adapt to use of English in the classroom and for assessments is coupled with the strain of navigating new systems, finding new social circles, and facing unfamiliar demands. This difficult adjustment is evidenced by first-year university students' high rates of depression, anxiety and stress [5].

General education (GE) courses are a common university requirement, often taken in the first year of study. GE aims to provide whole-person education by broadening students' breadth of knowledge and developing their general and intellectual skills, such as effective communication and critical thinking, attributes desired by the workforce. Thus, GE prepares students for their future disciplinary studies and careers while promoting lifelong learning [6]. In 2012, a GE curriculum was implemented at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) for all undergraduate degree programmes, aiming to develop students' professional competence, effective communication, critical thinking, lifelong learning, problem-solving and ethical leadership skills [7]. Students have reported improvements in their language, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills by taking these courses [6,7], while some have expressed confusion regarding the connection between the GE subjects and their disciplinary studies and future careers, highlighting the need for universities and educators to better communicate the purpose and rationale of GE subjects in facilitating their all-round education and whole-person development [6].

2. A general education storytelling subject

The subject *Storytelling for life: Sharing personal narratives* was developed and launched at the PolyU in 2018 as a GE elective in the category of human nature, relations and development. The subject aims for students to gain an appreciation of storytelling theory and practice and its role in human culture; demonstrate speaking skills for effective storytelling and communicating about their values,



beliefs and experiences; adapt communication techniques according to audience, purpose and context; evaluate storytelling performances and give constructive feedback; and communicate effectively about their storytelling experiences and development of speaking skills. Students learn the concepts, principles and techniques of effective storytelling which are applied to crafting and adapting personal narratives for different real-life situations. The performance aspect of storytelling, the use of body language, interaction, and voice, is also taught. Assessments include personal narrative storytelling performances, a self-evaluation, and reflective essay which documents the student's learning progression.

Various pedagogical approaches were applied in the course design. Story writing, or crafting, is taught using a genre-based approach to writing instruction. The advantages of using genre pedagogy with second-language students include the explicit instruction of text structure and the linking of the text with its context, which facilitates the understanding of the social purposes of the text type [8]. The teaching of storytelling structures such as the monomyth or hero's journey, the classic story arc, and others give students a helpful framework for crafting compelling stories. An awareness of situation and audience and the ability to use language flexibly to create meaning are inherent aspects of storytelling which make this approach particularly potent. Text modelling and discussion coupled with language analysis and discussion are used to support the learner's progress [8]. Many real-world storytelling videos featuring different types of speakers, purposes, audiences and contexts are curated and used for these purposes. Classroom storytelling activities in which feedback is given by peers and the teacher aids in scaffolding students' learning to improve their performances [9].

This explicit and supportive approach to teaching gives students access to the "powerful genres of mainstream culture" as they learn to use language flexibly in different life situations [8, p. 14]. Storytelling principles, skills and strategies can be applied in social settings with self-introductions, personal anecdotes and stories; in academic contexts such as group presentations and assessments such as proposals, case studies and incident reports; in business circles with job interviews and persuasive pitches; and in public domains such as public speaking and social media. Genre approaches may also facilitate students' reflection on and critique of socially constructed text constructions [8]. Discussion activities can prompt students to compare and contrast familiar Hollywood storylines and tropes with common story structures in other cultures, e.g. *kishotenketsu* of classical Chinese, Korean and Japanese narratives.

Oral storytelling is a presentation skill that can be developed through practice [10]. The explicit genre approach is likewise used to teach story delivery and voice techniques, which are clearly explained, modelled, deconstructed, discussed, and practiced with feedback. Filming videos of their storytelling performances on their phones allows students to document and assess their improvement, boosting their motivation. Practice of oral storytelling facilitates learning of communication skills [10], and by emphasising communication of meaning rather than language accuracy, students' anxiety can be reduced while speaking fluency and confidence can be enhanced.

Moreover, storytelling promotes the use and integration of the four language skills. Listening skills are built during storytelling activities [10]. Storytelling is an interactive process in which the speaker must shape their messages purposefully to connect with their audience. Group cohesion is built through activities which are enjoyable and entertaining [10]. Sharing and listening to stories based on personal experience is an authentic task which activates the students in their learning and promotes cooperation and critical thinking skills [11]. Linking the learning of storytelling concepts with practice aligns with Sociocultural Theory, and the social interaction which occurs promotes cognitive growth [2].

Reflection of learning is easily integrated into a storytelling curriculum [3]. As students share and make sense of their experiences through personal storytelling, these activities encourage self-review and construction of new knowledge [11]. The experiential learning process [4] is facilitated as students repeatedly tell stories, receive feedback and reflect on their performances, draw conclusions about their learning, and make adjustments and improvements for their next storytelling.

Finally, the subject's aim of adapting storytelling techniques for different purposes, audiences, and contexts supports the far transfer of learning, the learning in one context impacting other quite different contexts [12]. This phenomenon is essential for realizing the objectives of GE, in which learning is intended to enhance disciplinary subject study and work performance and be further integrated through life-long learning. Moreover, the rationale of how a GE storytelling subject learning is applicable to students' other coursework and future goals can be clearly shown, further enhancing student engagement, motivation, and satisfaction.



3. The future of storytelling in higher education

Throughout history and across cultures, storytelling is intrinsic to human beings and central to human existence. It brings meaning and coherence to our lives and a deeper understanding of human nature and our place in the world. It is a universal means of communication with applications in a vast number of contexts and situations. As such, storytelling itself is a worthy subject of study in higher education.

Beyond its use as a powerful learning tool, McDrury and Alterio [3] argue that storytelling is itself a learning theory. They propose a five-stage storytelling approach which facilitates undergraduate learning to promote professional development, which comprises story finding, telling, expanding, processing and reconstructing. In this model, students, who are training in clinical practice settings, share stories about their experiences and listen to those of their peers; their stories are expanded through questioning and processed through reflective dialogue, deepening their learning. The final stage, story reconstruction, involves critical evaluation and the potential for transformation of both storyteller and listener [3]. Could this approach for supportive and transformational learning be applied in a storytelling GE subject, which focuses on whole-person rather than professional development? Second-language students entering English medium-of-instruction universities face a different, yet equally taxing challenge in the stressful transition to university life.

It is proposed that storytelling subjects can be developed by universities in similar contexts to promote the broad aims of GE, build language and communication skills, and offer a supportive learning environment for first-year students. The courses could be extended to year-long offerings; the storytelling topics and activities could be customized to coordinate with other coursework in their first-year curriculum.

A storytelling subject focused on sharing personal narratives offers plentiful benefits for student learning, whether tailored for specific students or offered as an elective with more general aims. By engaging in the telling and retelling of personal stories, first-year students can share their hero's journey as they step into the unknown of academia, facing new challenges, being aided by helpers and mentors, slaying dragons, and transforming themselves in the process. The study of storytelling, its art and science, its concepts, principles, skills and strategies, can serve as an effective gateway to support students' transition to a new life at university.

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