Educational Stories: Engaging teachers in educational theory

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Abstract

A common complaint among those involved in teaching the educational foundations is the reluctance of many trainee teachers to engage in issues of educational theory. This is particularly apparent with those trainees who are more concerned with managing classrooms of children than grappling with what are often abstract and difficult ideas. This paper considers the current use of educational stories as a pedagogical strategy in teacher training, and a story that has been used in this way is presented. It is argued that teachers of the educational foundations disciplines can, via stories, appeal to the opposing tensions and schemata in students' own minds, and this engagement can be enhanced when students are confronted with broader educational debates, perspectives and proposals. Stories provide abstract concepts with a necessary tension, they suggest a way of entering the theoretical via the concrete and they show students the personal relevance of certain debates, which may have previously appeared remote and obscure. The end result is that students are challenged to make decisions about matters of fundamental importance such as the kinds of teachers they will be and about the ethical commitment they will make to teaching.

Introduction

In education it is often felt that there is a wide gap between theory and practice. This is reflected in the remark 'That's all right in theory but it doesn't work in practice'. To many it would seem that there are those who theorise and those who practise, and that the two groups may not have much to say to each other. This challenge, and this scepticism, extend in particular to the 'Foundations' disciplines which have traditionally been regarded as important in the preparation of teachers. Characteristic of such disciplines is that they are not school curriculum subjects as their content is not, or at least not usually, taught to pupils in the schools. Such academic, higher-order disciplines *about* education include such areas as sociology of education, philosophy of education, psychology of education and history of education. These subjects, perhaps especially philosophy of education, are often regarded as irrelevant to the day-to-day concerns of the teacher, especially those

students whose main concern, as David Ericson (1997, p. 501) puts it, is with 'classroom survival' and the 'nuts and bolts' approach to the practice of teaching.

Noel Preston and Colin Symes (1995, p. 3) comment: 'the somewhat "pragmatic cast of mind" characteristic of many teachers' makes them 'extremely resistant to inquiry of a speculative and analytic kind, which is the essence of educational theory'. They remark on the irony of this 'given that teachers are part of the knowledge industry, part of the "marketplace of ideas", and therefore should be reasonably at home with the ideas and argument, theory and speculation which form the currency of that market.' Preston and Symes go on to say that educational thinking is co-extensive with everyday thinking since most teachers, parents, administrators and even pupils 'have ideas about schooling, broad visions of what education ought to be like'.

It might seem, then, that what is required is that the lecturer attempt to show by *argument* the importance of the subject studied. Let us very briefly indicate two lines of such argument here. One which can be deployed is that based on the premise that teaching is 'a profession'. Hoyle (1975), for example, talks of the professional who is interested in the principles underlying the teacher's role, and not devoted merely to carrying out school policies. Similarly Downie (1999, p. 15) speaks of the professional as someone able to give an account of the fundamental rationale of one's practices, deal with challenges by others, and perform the social function of 'speaking out on broad matters of public policy and justice, going beyond duties to specific clients'. If Downie is right that such functions are entailed by 'professionalism', and if teaching is a profession, it is appropriate for teachers to study those subjects that investigate the rationale of educational practice.

A second type of argument questions the distinction between theory and practice. Such a distinction, it is said, is misleading in its suggestion that one can prise apart a practice and its underlying philosophical presuppositions. (This applies as well to the practices of other professions such as those of social work, law and the health sciences.) As Donald Freeman (1994) points out, teachers' thoughts and actions do not occur in separate domains. In their everyday practices and routines teachers act on the basis of controversial assumptions concerning the teaching environment, the curriculum, teaching methods, the aims of education and the management of schools. These assumptions can be articulated in various ways. And when the trainees' controversial assumptions and thoughts (or the assumptions and thoughts embedded in the institutional context itself (Bourdieu, 1996)) are brought to the surface, they can then be discussed and viewed in the light of various educational perspectives such as those deriving from the liberal, progressivist, emancipatory or economic standpoints outlined by Preston & Symes (1995, p. 54).

But such justifications for educational theorising are themselves theoretical and may not captivate those students who already feel that they don't want any more theory! So one wonders here: is it possible for the importance of theoretical discussion to be *shown* rather than argued for? More specifically, is it possible to show that important theoretical questions can arise from concrete educational situations, and can they arise in such a way that is likely to promote the engagement of the teacher trainee?

At this point one might be inclined to cast a favourable eye on those trends across many disciplines where a problem-centred approach is being implemented, and in particular where 'case studies' are being used as an instrument of learning (Margetson, 1993). The case study approach has the aim of raising important issues with the students, but one does this by focussing on a specific situation. The term 'case study' is not easy to define since in the various subject areas people mean different things by the expression ranging all the way from the detailed study of specific institutions (e.g. the study by Foucault (1982) on the birth of the prison and the work by Goffman (1969) on 'total institutions') to portraits of teachers such as those provided by Connell (1985) or Fenstermacher and Soltis (1992). In this essay the term will simply be used to refer to a realistic story that illustrates a concrete educational situation. We will presently give an example of such a story, but first let us consider the nature of stories in general and why story-telling can be seen as a useful pedagogical device (for a discussion of the increasing trend towards telling 'stories about teaching and teacher education' see Carter (1993), Noddings (1991), Gudmundsdottir (1991)).

Stories

W. B. Gallie has this to say about the nature of stories:

> Every story describes a sequence of actions and experiences of a number of people, real or imaginary. These people are usually presented in some characteristic human situation, and are then shown either changing it or reacting to changes which affect that situation from outside. As these changes and the characters' reactions to them accumulate, they commonly reveal hitherto hidden aspects of the original situation and of the characters; they also give rise to a predicament, calling for urgent thought and action from one or more of the main characters. The predicament is usually sustained and developed in various ways that bring out its significance for the main characters. Whether or not the main characters respond successfully to the predicament, their response to it, and the effects of their response upon the other people concerned, brings the story within sight of its conclusion. (Gallie, 1964, p. 22)

Gallie then gives his understanding of what it means to follow a story. Where we follow a story with interest, he says, we feel ourselves pulled along by the successive actions, events, thoughts and feelings described. The story has a direction. But there is also a 'dominant sense of alternative possibilities' which encourages us as readers to go beyond what we are told, guessing at what the next development will be, guessing at what the conclusion will be. In cases where we are told what happens at the end of a story this may spoil the story for us, for part of the compelling nature of a story is that it is to some extent governed by contingencies which preclude any certainty as to which possibilities will be actualised. The person writing or telling the story wants the readers to imaginatively conjecture what the development will be, to be aware of possibilities. But not any possibilities. The range of acceptable

possibilities is limited, and if the conclusion is too improbable we tend to say that the story is defective—we want believably realistic possibilities.

While not all stories follow Gallie's model (e.g. there are stories which are not about human beings, there are inconclusive stories, ones which are surreal), very many of them do. Gallie's account is useful because it helps to explain how typical stories can provoke thought and engage our interest. A crucial feature of stories, according to Gallie, is that they captivate us in part by the tension that they evoke, a tension that requires resolution. The tension involved in following a story may simply be that which occurs when we wonder how things are going to turn out. This tension is resolved when we find out what in fact happens. But there is also the tension produced by a 'predicament' that 'calls for urgent thought or action' (cf. also Scholes, 1982, p. 59) who talks of stories as containing 'a situation involving some predicament, conflict or struggle'). Once again, this tension may be resolved when we arrive at the conclusion of the story. But it may also be the case that in the course of the story certain tensions and oppositions brought to the surface are not resolvable in any such ready manner. It is this phenomenon that may be especially relevant in the case-study approach to teacher education, and we wish to spend some time exploring it using as a focus the following case study that was recently presented to Education students in our faculty. It has been selected not on grounds of any particular literary merit, but because it elicited discussion amongst students and led easily into those educational topics which the lecturers thought important for the students to discuss.

Mary and the Woodchippers

Mary is a young teacher who is teaching a class of 32 eleven-year-olds. She is conscientious, enthusiastic about her work and finds the pupils responsive and eager to learn. In one of Mary's lessons she introduces the topic of the environment, with especial reference to the debate concerning the preservation of old growth forest. Mary knows that this is a sensitive issue, but believes that teachers should not shy away from the teaching of controversial topics. The topic causes great interest and the pupils ask Mary what her own position is. She indicates that while she acknowledges that various old growth areas have been set aside as scenic reserves, she regrets the fact that areas previously designated as wilderness areas are now being logged.

The principal of Mary's school informs Mary that a complaint has been lodged by some of the parents. Several parents, after talking to their children, are convinced that Mary has been indoctrinating her charges with radical environmental values. The principal explains to Mary that since the town is heavily dependent on the logging industry, any lessons should in future be discussed with the principal beforehand. However, since the lesson has been given they must now go into 'damage control' mode, so a meeting has been arranged for interested parents on the following Tuesday evening.

The principal's words throw Mary into a state of acute apprehension. She is less sure now of the wisdom of introducing controversial topics to children and more

circumspect about what role the teacher should play. She decides to discuss the matter with Jessica, a close work colleague and friend who teaches another class in the school and has been teaching for many years and in many different schools. Mary knows that Jessica has some quite radical views compared to the other members of staff. Jessica's response is predictable: it is the teacher's duty, she says, to educate, and this includes educating the local community, and Mary has her full support in any consciousness-raising enterprise.

When the time comes for the meeting on Tuesday evening, Mary's worst fears are realised—word has spread like a forest fire (an unfortunate metaphor, thinks Mary) and she and the principal are face to face with an intimidatingly large group of parents.

One of the parents (Parent A), who has worked for many years as contractor with the Forestry Commission, reiterates the claim that Mary has been indoctrinating the pupils. Mary denies it, insisting that she had been presenting the different viewpoints as impartially as possible. The parent points out that Mary did in fact indicate her own position to the class, and this constituted, in his opinion, undue influence. Mary asks whether Parent A would have been happy with the situation if she had not indicated her own preferences to the class.

At this point another parent (Parent B) interrupts and says 'Whether or not the teacher tells about her own views is not the point—the point is that controversial topics shouldn't be taught to primary schoolchildren at all. The teacher's job is to be teaching literacy and numeracy skills—basically. Perhaps the children might be introduced to a range of facts, but value matters and controversies should be avoided.'

Parent C: 'Hear! hear! And there's too much time spent in this school on drama, art, and music—education is about facts and basic skills, these other things are luxuries.'

Principal: 'I think you are asking some really important questions. I wonder if we could distinguish these questions and consider them separately? There is the question whether a teacher's stance on a controversial topic should be aired in class. Then there is the question whether controversial topics should be introduced at all, at least on the primary school curriculum. Then there is the big question: what should be on the curriculum anyway?'

Crises

When presented to teacher trainees the above story can lead off in various managerial, sociological, psychological, and philosophical directions, not to mention its potential to elicit a wide variety of reminiscences and commonsense reactions. This can be reassuring to those tertiary teachers who believe in the pedagogical effectiveness of open-ended discussion and who are seeking as much participation as possible (Hahn, 1991). But it can also be disconcerting for them if they realise that the students in their discussions resemble the rider who leapt on his horse and rode off in all directions. We need to recall that when we write, devise or select a story we are guided by a view as to what is of educational importance, and this was true with regard to the writing of the above story. In particular, we wish to draw

attention to certain aspects of Mary's predicament which resemble what Alasdair MacIntyre has called 'epistemological crises':

> Someone who has believed that he was highly valued by his employers and colleagues is suddenly fired; someone proposed for membership of a club whose members were all, so he believed, close friends is blackballed. Or someone falls in love and needs to know what the loved one *really* feels; someone falls out of love and needs to know how she or he can possibly have been so mistaken in the other. It is in such situations that ordinary agents who have never learned anything about academic philosophy are apt to rediscover for themselves versions of the other-minds problem and the problem of induction. (MacIntyre, 1977, p. 453)

With MacIntyre the sort of context provided for epistemological scepticism is as follows. We all participate in social life, and our social life is sustained by certain assumptions concerning ourselves and other people, certain 'schemata'. These schemata can be disrupted when the individual becomes aware of the existence of 'alternative and rival schemata that yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on around him'.

In 'Mary and the Woodchippers' Mary is plunged into an epistemological crisis. She finds that her usual assumptions and dependabilities are disrupted. For one thing, she can no longer be sure that the principal will stand resolutely behind her and the other teachers in the face of parental displeasure. Secondly, her belief in herself as a fair, impartial and responsible teacher is now subject to challenge. Thirdly, and relatedly, she is unsure of her role as teacher now that she has become aware of rival formulations as provided by the parents and her friend Jessica. To put it in MacIntyre's terminology, there is a crisis that is created when one educational schema has collided with others.

Some may see Mary's crisis as a purely managerial problem. Mary (and perhaps the principal) have made certain mistakes which can be rectified if Mary now takes the purely pragmatic line of 'smoothing things over' and acting on the principle of action described by Argyris & Schön (1987, p. 21) as 'Keep people calm'. But such an attempt at pacification, successful or not, does not delve into Mary's predicament and may have the effect of closing off any formulation of the participants' assumptions regarding teaching, schooling and education. And if Mary does pragmatically capitulate to the parents (and perhaps the principal) she will be faced with the problem of whether her future practice can be made congruent with her own educational commitments. Thus Mary's problem is not simply one of educational management. It is also a question of how certain conceptual and valuational tensions are to be resolved.

These tensions may derive from conflict between Mary's commitments and the behaviour that is expected of her, she may also have no clear idea of what her commitments *are*, and she may experience opposing tendencies and beliefs within herself. It is not difficult for teacher trainees to understand and identify with such internal dissonances—it is a quite common experience for teacher trainees to find themselves inclined to champion both sides of a debate, or at least to feel allegiance to seemingly discrepant positions.

Parents A and B, for example, embody an educational point of view which many students sympathise with, namely that if teachers divulge their personal views on controversial topics they may very well influence and may even indoctrinate in areas which are the subject of public contention. The students may be inclined to agree with R. S. Peters (1971, p. 202) that 'the teacher has no right to use the special relationship in which he stands to children to parade his own idiosyncratic opinions …' But contrary to what Parents A and B believe the same students may feel, quite strongly, that if certain controversial topics are not dealt with in class, this will entail that there is a gap left in the pupils' education and their preparation for living in a pluralist society. Accordingly they may, as a compromise, endorse the view that controversial issues should be taught to pupils but only with the teacher acting as a 'neutral chairperson' (Stenhouse, 1983). At the same time, however, they may perceive that this collides with the forthrightly expressed and diametrically opposed viewpoint of Mary Warnock:

> … why should (the teacher) remain neutral in discussion? Why should it be supposed that … children … do not learn from clear and decisive moral views being avowed and even implemented in practice? If the teacher is a moral agent he must have views, principles, attitudes, even passions. And it is only if he is seen to be a moral agent that he can teach his pupils to be moral agents too. (Warnock, 1977, p. 141)

Thus the students, while understanding and being inclined to endorse the view that teachers should be neutral as regards controversy, may also be committed to the opposing proposition that Mary should be setting an example as a concerned and fair-minded inquirer who can argue these matters through with her class, and who can be impartial without having to be neutral (Bailey, 1975).

Related to this is the conflict which students may experience if they perceive that there are equally strong reasons for adopting a 'process-based' strategy in teaching controversial issues (one which simply develops skills for dealing with controversiality) as there are for adopting a 'product-based' approach (one which stipulates that specific topics must be covered) (Stradling, 1985, p. 5). Thus Mary's predicament need not be a remote one: the opposing tendencies experienced by Mary or articulated in the theoretical literature can be reflected in the students' own minds.

Why Striking a Chord Is Not Enough

Having a story or (more generally) a case study as a focus in one's teacher education classes does not guarantee that students will engage with educational issues. They may not find the story interesting. They may not even find it intelligible—it may seem 'a tale told by an idiot'. And even if the story depicts an existential situation, it is possible that the students will find it to be of only passing interest. What is required is not just that the story be intelligible and of some interest, it should also be provocative, and this will most likely be the case if the story contains dissonances which mirror the students' own experiences and need for resolution.

This means that the educator's task is in part to make explicit the tensions which are already present in the 'domestic relations' (Nozick, 1981, p. 17) of the students'

attitudes and beliefs, and this can be done while showing that the conflicts reflect a wider social debate and are subject to intellectual inquiry. But the process is not just one of articulation. The 'Foundations' disciplines can also have the effect of *creating* dissonance. It may be helpful if we clarify this externally provoked dissonance by drawing a parallel with Quine's account of knowledge. According to Quine the totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs consists of a web or system where the re-evaluation of one's beliefs requires the re-evaluation of many others. This web 'impinges on experience only at the edges' (Quine, 1964, p. 42). When we are confronted with a 'contrary' experience, this contrary experience does not guarantee that any particular belief must be surrendered since there can be an accommodating reorganisation of one's belief system. Quine's focus of interest is on the 'man-made fabric' of scientific knowledge, but his views have application to the case at hand since each of us has a connected system of ideas and beliefs that can be the subject of external challenge and subsequent reorganisation. In the case of Sociology, for example, students are often confronted with a variety of topics which are a challenge to them, and their beliefs: the origins of inequality, the school as a conservative rather than a liberating force, the social construction of knowledge and the curriculum, gender differences and curriculum bias, and so on. Students have to resolve (or at least deal with) the tensions and contradictions that emerge between their own views and those that they encounter on the course. Thus for example there is the tension some students have to resolve between the view they hold that their society is a classless society—or at least one that is egalitarian—and the evidence to the contrary. How they do this will, at least on Quine's account, remain to some extent indeterminate since on his view there is a considerable latitude of choice in how one restructures one's belief system.

It is therefore not sufficient that a case study strike a chord with the students. Nor is it sufficient to simply articulate the tensions that are already present in the students' minds. What is also required is some intervention on the part of the teacher, and the case study of 'Mary and the Woodchippers' exemplifies how teachers in sociology, philosophy and educational theory have the opportunity to be what Goldsmid and Wilson (1980) call 'benign disrupters' of the students' own views on the purpose of teaching, on what role teachers should play in covering sensitive social issues, what should be taught in classrooms, the respective rights of teachers and parents in relation to teachers and teaching, and how one might arbitrate between the very different interest groups competing for control of the curriculum, or at least competing for substantial influence (Dearden, 1976). To the extent that the story does challenge their own views and experiences, and to the extent that the 'benign disrupter' has also provided that emotional support and confidence which prevents paralysis and withdrawal, the students will have the opportunity to resolve Mary's dilemmas in a way which leads to their personal engagement in the evaluation of the issues.

Theory and the Forming of Educational Intentions

In making abstract issues accessible to students the story seems a useful tool. It provides abstract concepts with a necessary friction. And it suggests a way of entering the theoretical via the concrete, of showing to students the personal relevance

of certain debates that previously appeared remote and abstruse (cf. Degenhardt, 2003). But the focus in this essay has been that teachers in the 'educational foundations' disciplines can, via stories, appeal to the opposing tensions and schemata in the students' own minds, and with some intervention from the teacher the existing belief system of the students can be challenged and reflected on. In the remainder of this paper it will be spelled out how this process of challenge and reflection can be personally crucial for the teacher leading as it does to a type of self-knowledge which is ultimately ethical and mediated by decision.

In describing Mary's situation as a 'crisis' one is virtually implying that this is a situation in which she is *engaged*, and in Mary's case and with all the 'epistemological crises' depicted by MacIntyre, the nature of the participants' engagement is such that their conception of *themselves* is in question. Charles Taylor talks of the role of theory in confronting and challenging our self-definitions:

> … the framing of theory rarely consists simply of making practice explicit. The stronger motive for making and adopting theories is the sense that our implicit understanding is in some way crucially inadequate or even wrong. Theories do not just make our constitutive self-understandings explicit, but extend, or criticise or even challenge them. (Taylor, 1990, p. 94)

According to Taylor (1990, p. 111), if we acquire a better self-definition we 'understand better what we are doing', which in turn can alter our practices.

We generally associate concepts such as 'self-understanding' and 'self-knowledge' with reflection and passivity, not decision and action. This being so, such concepts may seem to diminish rather than strengthen the links between theory and practice. There is, however, a corrective to any such impression in an astute paper by David Hamlyn on 'Self-Knowledge' (Hamlyn, 1977). Hamlyn draws a distinction between self-knowledge as on the one hand consisting in what one knows or believes *about* oneself and on the other as a type of knowledge that is mediated by decision. Hamlyn thinks that those carrying out philosophical and psychological investigations into self-knowledge have tended to construe it as the former, whereas his paper emphasises the latter. Hamlyn does not deny of course that knowledge or beliefs *about* oneself are important, and we can see its importance if we reflect once more on our case study. Mary has certain initial beliefs about her role as a teacher and certain beliefs regarding her fairness and impartiality, she has certain perceptions about the relation between herself and others, and in the course of the story she comes to realise that her actions have certain effects on other people, that the criteria which govern her conception of herself as a teacher are not the only possible ones, that hitherto she has had a limited viewpoint on what she has been doing; and she may also come to learn more about her role as one authority who is part of a network of authorities in the state, that her sphere of action is limited to some degree by powerful influences shaping the organisation and selection of content in the curriculum and the practices of teaching, and so on.

But beliefs about oneself and one's situation are only one aspect of self-knowledge. There is also the phenomenon that is colloquially referred to as 'knowing one's own mind'. In this regard Hamlet, for all his introspections, might be said not to know

himself at all. In gradually acquiring an awareness of herself and the dimensions of her situation, Mary may, conversely, confront certain choices which lead to the type of self-knowledge which Hamlyn says is 'mediated by decision'. Some of Mary's choices have already been indicated in detail, but they may also involve a wider intellectual assessment of her own teaching situation (Dewhurst, 1992; Crittenden, 1996). As Hampshire (1969, p. 174) puts it, 'as soon I become in this way self-conscious about my own activity, the situation changes', and for Hampshire this change has a moral dimension. He makes the point that someone who is enclosed within a narrow circle of thoughts and interests is not *ipso facto* to be described as imprisoned in that circle:

> … there is a sense in which he is responsible, if it is within his power now to widen his interests and if he has not tried to do this. There is a sense in which (a person) is responsible for any condition which he would be able to change if he tried, even if the condition was originally the effect of causes outside his control. (Hampshire, 1969, p. 185)

For Hampshire this extension of one's intellectual boundaries has an urgency because of its bearing on human agency and responsible decision-making.

However we are likely to find that in this inquiry there are no simple formulas for action. Nor do all problems have one best or correct solution. This is because integral to the processes of education are contested concepts and competing considerations. It is up to the teacher to weigh these considerations and answer fundamental questions regarding what her educational aims should be. This weighing of opposing principles and arguments may be a difficult process requiring decision and having implications not only for the public and professional activities which Downie's (1999) account requires of teachers but also for the sort of teacher (and perhaps even the sort of person) one will be. As Nozick puts it:

> The reasons do not come with previously given precisely specified weights; the decision process is not one of discovering such precise weights but of assigning them. The process not only weighs reasons, it (also) weights them … This process of weighting may focus narrowly, or involve considering or deciding what sort of person one wishes to be, what sort of life one wishes to lead. (Nozick, 1981, p. 294)

The same applies to the forming of fundamental educational intentions. It is by making such educational decisions (and thereby excluding those other possibilities we choose not to act on) that we determine our role as teachers and the kind of commitment we are to make to teaching.

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