USING STORYLINE FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Storyline is a strategy to motivate learners. The teacher, as facilitator, designs a ‘red thread’ of a story that aims for educational targets and by asking key questions that encourages the learners to become partners in the creation of the story. It is a kind of paradox that while the teacher knows the line to be followed, the learners feel that they have the ownership of the story. Each story has three elements - people, time and place (or setting). It will be shown how storyline can become useful in working with language delayed children.

INTRODUCTION

The scene is set in Scotland, the date 1965, when major changes to the school curriculum were recommended in a new national curriculum guidance document. Instead of teaching separate subjects using textbooks, the emphasis was to be on a change to the integration of subjects. Teachers were advised to take a holistic view of education, to make sense of the world for the students by relating skill learning to examples taken from real life in order to demonstrate why education was necessary and important.

One of the integrated areas proposed in this new curriculum was termed ‘environmental studies’. Teachers noted that this could not be a subject, because it comprised several subjects – history, geography, science, technology and health. Environmental studies therefore had to be either a process of teaching or a methodology. How were teachers expected to implement it in the classroom? Class teachers, who are always generalists in Scottish primary schools, had never been trained to teach in this way, and so they requested help in the form of strategies or models that could provide structures for teaching in an integrated or cross-curricular way.

The situation led to the creation in 1967 of a staff tutor team at Jordanhill College of Education, Glasgow (now the Faculty of Education for the University of Strathclyde). The team’s function was to support teachers by working with them in this integrated area of the curriculum and I was one of the three tutors appointed to form this original group.
After several years of testing various approaches, one particular pattern gradually emerged. This was the approach known, at that time, as ‘topic work’, and now recognised internationally as Storyline. The development was organic, very gradual and depended greatly on the views and criticisms of the teachers. Experimenting teachers advised the tutors on what should be retained and what should be removed. This developmental process proved to be honest, reliable and effective.

The Staff Tutors were paid as members of the college of education staff but were freed from lecturing to students. They worked only with teachers. This was a unique idea and no other college in Scotland provided such a service. Many college lecturers, of course, offered in-service courses in the very limited extra time that they had available. Developments over the period 1967 to 1995 proved to be a rich, rewarding and challenging experience for the members of this group. Working with teachers is very different from working with students, as teachers know what will be effective for them and are quick to welcome or criticise depending on the quality of the new ideas. Since these ideas related to a form of practice it was necessary to attempt to design appropriate courses. The chosen design for these followed the sequence – Practice -> Reflection-> Theory.

The original versions were based on a two or three-day programme. Teachers were attracted by the practical help they gained from actually participating in the work, which they would then use with their own class. Courses were taken to the teachers and presented in various local centres as well as at the college.

By popular demand, some courses would be followed by school visits and a feedback day. Other programmes concentrated on certain curricular aspects aimed at teachers who needed more help with art, music, drama and movement. The common element was that teachers should experience the ownership and involvement of working in this way, which would then encourage them to use the same methodology in their classrooms.

Over the years, new educational movements and theories such as Reggio Emilia, Constructivism, Whole Language and the Theory of Multiple Intelligences supported the elements on which Storyline is designed. Thirty-four years on, it has developed into a philosophy, or pedagogy, and it has been adapted for use in many different countries in Europe, America and the Far East. Its robust and flexible nature has proved to be attractive, compelling and persuasive to educators from many different countries.

So, what exactly is Storyline, and why has it been found to be so useful to so many? Let us examine the elements that are a necessary part of any Topic Study using this methodology.

THE SCENARIO
Each Storyline topic starts with the designing of a scenario that requires three elements: (1) characters (who are the people involved?), (2) time (is it the present, the past or the future?) and (3) a place or a setting (does the action take place in a neighbourhood or during a holiday trip or ... ?).
THE TEACHER’S ROLE

The teacher is a ‘designer of learning’ operating like a film director. The context is selected with curricular aims in mind. The teacher decides what content should be included and what learning activities will be given priority. The crucial behaviour of a successful Storyline teacher is in the role of facilitator, not as an authority of all knowledge but as a supporter of learning, working together in partnership with the students.

In this approach there is an emphasis not only on the knowledge that will be gained but also on the skills that will be practised and on the attitudes that will be explored.

THE ‘RED THREAD’

As in any good story there is a ‘red thread’ that gives context and meaning to the sequence of episodes. It is important that the red thread can bend, but it must not be allowed to break. The students must be able to follow the story as it moves. It is vital that leaving the action for long periods does not divert them. This could break the thread. Every story needs continuity and progression.

The great paradox in using Storyline is that the teacher has planned for almost every activity in which the learners will engage, but the students feel that they have ownership of the story. The teacher has decided on curricular targets and knows what knowledge will be covered and what skills will be practised. This creates feelings of security for both teacher and learner. Each activity follows on naturally from the previous one, and seems necessary for the story to continue. The teacher knows the targets and the general route to be followed, while the learner feels confident because of the strength of the context and the relevance of the activities.

KEY QUESTIONING

One of the best resources we have in any classroom is the knowledge and information already contained in the heads of the students. This existing knowledge has to be tapped and connected to new learning. This is done by key questioning. Using such a learning process demonstrates respect by giving responsibility to the learners.

In order to answer the questions raised, a wide variety of activities is designed. Students communicate their ideas in many different forms; it is valuable to encourage students to create visuals (pictures, models, friezes) of their answers. This supports all the learners, whether naturally visual or non-visual. Students feel the ownership of their work and therefore of the story that is being created. They become much more motivated to write about their characters and the settings when they have created visuals of them.

Active learning techniques commonly used include brainstorming, problem-solving, imaginative thinking, speculating, presenting orally, writing in a wide variety of forms, making illustrations by drawing and collage, model building, making maps and plans, using computers, tape-recorders, digital cameras and video, etc.
DISPLAY OF STUDENTS’ WORK
The relationship between learners and teachers is a subtle thing. Everything that happens in a classroom can affect mutual respect. When students take trouble in making a visual, for example, it is important that this is recognised in the way that the teacher helps them to display their work. By being actively involved in making the student’s work look better, the teacher demonstrates respect in a simple way for that work. This also means that the teacher can expect high standards of work to be displayed.

CO-OPERATIVE LEARNING
Over the period of a Storyline study there will be many activities for individuals, but work will also be organised for various group sizes – groups of 2 or 3, larger groups or whole class activities, and always the size of group will be related to the type of activity. A wrong choice of group size can ruin the plan.

HYPOTHESISING
Hypothesising is a major principle in Storyline. By encouraging the learners to create their own conceptual model first, in answer to a question, the students provide creative answers. Referring to evidence and research they then test their ideas. This pattern is a learning process that can create independence for the students. The greatest aim for students is that they learn how to learn. The measure of success for teachers is how well the students can operate as independent learners. In Storyline, we try to model the study process in everything we do:

1. we start from the known
2. we design key questions
3. we create a hypothesis or model
4. we test the model against research evidence
5. we adapt our model according to the results
6. we review what we have done and what we have learned

This idea is linked with listing criteria for any task to be undertaken. For example, if the Storyline is about a business like ‘Shopping’, the teacher might ask the key question «In how many different ways can we advertise our shop?»

The students’ brainstorming leads to a list including posters, newspaper ads., brochures, flyers, sandwich boards, radio jingles, TV ads., roadside hoardings, air balloons, etc.

The teacher may then select one of these for further discussion and ask the question: «What do you think are the elements that make a good radio jingle?»

After brainstorming, the students suggest that it should be: short, humorous, give the necessary information (name of shop, type, situation, etc.), should have rhythm or be accompanied by music. The teacher can also add criteria.
This list is then presented to the students as a structure to help them design an effective radio jingle for the shop that they have made. Their designs are presented and compared with the criteria that they have suggested. Thus the list of criteria becomes a basis for self-evaluation.

This process follows good learning procedures that can be repeated in many different situations so that the students become familiar with this structure as a way of working. In other words, this is helping students to learn how to learn.

THE VISIT OR THE EXPERT WITNESS
Every Storyline should end on a high point. Usually, this is in the form of a celebration or a culminating event. Often the high point of a topic study is designed as an external visit or when an expert witness visits the class. This brings into the classroom the reality of the outside world, but it also treats the learners’ studies with respect. This event can often be organised as a parents’ evening, which allows the teacher to pass on information not only about what the students have been doing, but why. In a very obvious way we are relating the classroom work to real life and demonstrating that education is for life.

These, then, are the main elements of any Storyline. One principle that emerges from all of this is the belief that Good Structures bring Freedom. One of the major problems in holistic teaching is how to provide an effective structure. A good story does this. Each episode also provides opportunities to support learning in a wide variety of subject and skill areas.

DESIGNING A STORYLINE TOPIC
From the first days of developing a structure for integration it became necessary to provide a format to illustrate the plan of work. Six columns provide the key to all the various aspects of planning which were thought to be appropriate.

The first is headed Storyline and contains the ‘chapters’ of the story. This contained all the episodes in sequence – the ‘red thread’.

The second is for the Key Questions. This is arguably the most difficult aspect of designing a Storyline. Key questions are open questions that are not asking for a right answer. They ask for imaginative thinking and opinions that can be supported by argument. Typically, they are questions that begin with «In how many different ways...?» or «How do you think ........?» or «Why do you think.........?» or «How is it that ......?»

The third column is headed Activities. Here the designers list a wide variety of activities which they think will lead to the answering of the key questions. Teachers will want to focus on skill practices that will help students reach curricular targets.

The fourth heading is Organisation. Every activity is identified as being for an optimum number of students. For example, when making a family, teachers have to decide what group sizes will be involved. The activities can be planned for groups of 4 or 5, but each student will make a family member having negotiated who that person will be with the rest of the family group. This activity would be listed as ‘Groups of 4/5 and individual’ in the organisation column. As previously stated, the planning of group sizes is an important
aspect of the design. It is possible to ruin an activity by having too many students involved in a group, leaving some without meaningful activity.

Column five is designed to help with the plan for Materials. There is an assumption here that a kit of basic materials is available in the classroom. The Materials column is for making sure that any extra or special materials are ready for using in that particular activity. It could be that a tape recorder is needed or a map of Asia or a special size of cardboard box or ...

The final column is a list of Outcomes. What has been produced?

ASSESSMENT
Quality in education is an important aspect of any changes made in the ways we work with students. It is not enough for us as teachers to say that we think the students are responding to what and how we teach. It is necessary for us to be able to prove it. It is therefore our responsibility to record progression in learning in a way that provides evidence of these changes.

One way of doing this, if Storyline methods are being used, is through Portfolio Assessment. Individual work is collected over a period of time in a portfolio. Much of a child’s work may already be displayed on a classroom wall and that, of course, would also be taken into account. The teacher meets with the child to review the work done. «Show me a piece of work of which you are really proud?» the teacher says. This is discussed and the child is asked for reasons, «What makes this so good? Why is it better than this? Is there a piece of work that you think is very poor? Why?» In using this approach, students are helped to assess their own work – leading to more independence.

It is also possible to set typical written questions that would test acquired knowledge if that were the aim.

At the bottom of every Storyline column in a topic plan is a REVIEW. The teacher asks the key question, «What do you think you have learned by doing this topic?» The students brainstorm and list all the aspects of knowledge and skill they have covered. The teacher’s role is then to discuss each item on the list and to help the learners define what they have learned: dealing with scale – mathematics; using maps and plans – geography; discussing gravity and friction – physics; discussing sensible diets – health and hygiene, etc., etc.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PROJECT WORK AND STORYLINE
Many teachers have been doing ‘Project Work’ for some years and this can be a valuable form of structure for teaching in an integrated way. It is usually ‘enquiry-based’ in its design, which means that the students are encouraged to make a study of a real example to gather evidence. This is then used to record their findings and to stimulate towards further study. In some ways the results can seem similar to Storyline. It is, however, possible for a Project to be studied objectively. For example, a Project study of pollution can be made as if seen from a distance – objectively. This is unlike Storyline, where there is always a personal involvement through identification with the characters of the story.
In any Storyline, biographies are written and visuals are made of the characters that are created. These imaginary people are set in a time and place relevant to the story. The learners, the creators, identify closely with these people and become emotionally involved with them and the events that take place in the story. For example, if the teacher were to approach a frieze of a row of shops made by groups in a class, and pretended to be a graffiti vandal threatening one shop, there would immediately be an angry response from its creators. The teacher would, of course, never deliberately damage children’s work, but the threat is enough to stimulate a strong reaction. Similarly, the feelings of those whose shops have not been threatened can be explored!

Storyline has become a truly international method over the years and one of the most popular Storyline topics used in Thailand is called River Families. Class groups create families who live in a river village. They introduce their families to each other and then explore day-to-day life in the village. Happy and sad incidents can be suggested. How they celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, national holidays can be explored. The river for them is the focus and source of their life; it’s their motorway, their shopping centre, their water source, their washhouse, and so on. The teacher can use this context to aim at a special study on river pollution. For example, one morning the family leaves home to discover dead fish floating on the surface of their river. What do they think has happened? What could possibly cause this? What tests should they make? Who is responsible? What can they as a community do about it?

As teachers, we are expected to teach about families and family relationships. Talking about real families represented in the classroom can often be very difficult and may be even embarrassing for the students involved. Using the visuals of an imaginary family, created as part of a Storyline, is always effective. Children with no father/mother at home can create the family they have or the family they would like to have. The relationships between father and son, mother and daughter, can be explored, and family rules designed. Friendships can be developed and dislike can be discussed openly and in an unthreatening atmosphere.

**STORYLINE AS MOTIVATION FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT**

Over the past four years, Storyline courses have been presented at the Bredtvet Centre. Members of staff there have shown great interest in how some of the techniques in Storyline might be adapted and developed for stimulating language-use with clients.

In general terms, it is recognised that Storyline, as a strategy, helps to create a context which provides an audience and a purpose for the use of language in all its various forms. Teachers interested in working with Severe Language Impairment are now in the process of experimenting with a selection of Storyline techniques that may prove of value to them.

A Storyline teacher interested in working with SLI children would select and design a story within the direct experience of the learners and fun for those involved; for example, a main street, a playpark, a farm, a shop, a home and family, etc.

Selecting the first of these ideas as an example, and using such basic materials as LEGO
or scrap cardboard boxes, the children build a model of a busy street. Coloured paper stretched over a tabletop becomes the wide roadway, while models of tall buildings are constructed on either side. The teacher creates the visual of the street through questioning: «If this paper is a busy main street what do you think the buildings might look like on either side?» It is usually necessary for the teacher to model an example of the visual depending on the prior experience of the children involved.

Once the street has been created the learners immediately feel the ownership. The street has been built because of the teacher’s questions, but the model belongs to the children. When they have built the model they are usually more motivated to discuss it with the teacher. They feel expert in this situation – the opposite of the norm. The larger the model in terms of number and variety of buildings the more opportunity for language stimulation. The creators need the vocabulary to present their buildings. Tasks are designed to encourage word production and problem tackling. «How many yellow buildings are there in the street? How many red ones? Which is the tallest building and which the smallest? How can we check that this is the tallest – is it better to count the bricks or to use a piece of string to measure? Where is your building in the street? Is it next to/ beside/opposite/between or ...?»

«Who lives in your building?» The children are encouraged to create one or more characters who live in their buildings. LEGO Duplo or simple collage figures can be used to stimulate simple biographies. The teacher invites the learners to give a name and age for each person and perhaps something about a job, relationships and hobbies. If several figures are produced they have to be introduced to each other, giving reason to present, communicate and interact. Depending on the stage of development of the children and their personal ability they can be encouraged to discuss friendships with other characters. «Are there people you really like to meet on the street?» the teacher asks. «Are there people you don’t like to meet? Why?»

The main street is usually very busy with traffic. «What kinds of traffic would you expect to see in the street?» A list is made from suggestions by the children – buses, trucks, vans, cars, bicycles, etc. Toy vehicles can be added or LEGO materials or small boxes can be used to create the types of vehicle they have listed. New word lists are needed to describe the traffic. We can explore the scene through the five senses: I see? I hear? I touch? I taste? I smell?

These questions can be answered by listing two examples of each sense in the form adjective noun:

I see big trucks, red buses
I hear noisy engines, screaming brakes
(Touch and taste are more difficult and can either be included or left out)
I smell smoky fumes, burning rubber
(This is our main street!)
This structure of a Sense Poem is an example of the way in which visualisation of the story provides a focus for language learning activities. It could have a noun/verb construction or another chosen by the teacher.

«What kinds of markings do they have on the road that make it safer for drivers?»

These can be discussed and added with chalk or cut paper.

The model people are placed on the pavements on either side of the roadway and the teacher asks: «In how many different ways do you think we can get people safely across the road?» The answers may include an underpass, a bridge, lights, a person directing traffic and a crossing place marked on the road. These ideas can be explored through discussion and a selection is made to be added to the model.

One person wishes to visit a friend who lives across the street. «What do you think is the safest way to get there?» «Can you tell that friend about the safest way to come from his house to your house?»

The main street becomes a working model that can be exploited by the teacher for many different and varied skill practices. «Your friend wants to send a message to your home but he doesn’t know your address. Can you think of a good name for your street and what number should your house have?» The discussion of addresses can lead to the sending of postcards, letters or invitations.

«What is a typical day in the life of your character?»

In every Storyline there are opportunities for incidents. Children can be asked to suggest happy or sad incidents that might happen in their main street. They suggest for example a traffic accident, a fire, a birthday party, a theft or a love story. Whatever is proposed can be used by the teacher as a focus for language practice. The street model is a constant visual support, the figures can be used like puppets and the children feel that they are the creators of their story. They feel a very real and positive partnership with the teacher, who plays a professional and significant role as the director and designer of the story. Mutual respect is encouraged by the design.

A Storyline should always end on a high point. One of the celebratory incidents might be selected for this – a party for a new building that is being officially opened in the street by a very important person. Some such event can provide an exciting ending to the story.

One example – the main street – has been given to help to describe the Storyline process, but the same kinds of activities can be produced for any of the other themes listed and for any other story selected by the teacher.

One of the difficulties for SLI teachers can be that they are often working with individual clients. A suggestion for overcoming this difficulty could be that some time is taken to build up the model with each client adding his/her own building to the street. At each visit, the changes would be noted and would be another opportunity for language comment. It would take longer than if they were working with groups of children, but the outcome could be rewarding. These are the types of adaptations that will be necessary when an SLI teacher selects and adapts from this approach what they think would be of value in their teaching.