Tell me a Story

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Summary

Critical reflection plays a major part in the changing of experience into learning and involves consciously thinking about one's experiences and thought that involves critical reflection involves learning. A structured questioning process attached to storytelling for determining competency is used by Centres for Assessment of Prior Learning in NZ.

Presentation

The use of complex storytelling is centred around the candidate being led through questioning by the facilitator to explore a complexity of issues/ideas from a selected scenario of practice in order to assess knowledge, skills and abilities simultaneously. The facilitation process provides the 'thinking' framework. Narrative storytelling as an assessment method has its origins in the social science methodologies: discourse analysis and behavioural interviewing as well as in indigenous pedagogy. The model used draws from theorists and practitioners such as Dewey, Boud and Schon, Foucault, Argyris, Kolb and Merrill. CAPL assessment of prior learning processes employ a facilitated technique in order for the candidate to be able to develop a rich complex narrative. This narrative not only documents their learning but also has the capacity to be a catalyst for further learning. Through storytelling new meanings are created, opening up possibilities for change, improvement and ongoing professional development. The paradigm of the reflective practitioner is core to the process. Reflection is a key aspect of critical thinking that allows candidates to integrate their learning into a coherent whole. It is argued that the critically reflective learning articulated by candidates through professional 'conversations' or stories provides a useful starting point for lifelong learning.

Tell me a Story

Storytelling

This is perceived as a very useful way to understand an event from differing perspectives and to get constructive ideas about how to deal with similar situations in the future. It values and incorporates the traditional method of sharing information, enables clarification and debriefing while affirming practice. Through storytelling new meanings are created, opening up possibilities for change, improvement and ongoing professional development.

The main perceived weaknesses of storytelling involve concerns about the accuracy of the story. There is also uncertainty about how much of the story to tell - this particularly relates to the telling of the context. An email came from a client recently:

> I actually did up a 1 pager with setting the scene thing but might hold that in reserve. I also did a reading list and a list of the courses I/we went on.

Comments from participants show that the teller of the story is open to hearing their story from other perspectives. They believe that good group skills are important and that the role of the facilitator is particularly important within the reflective process.

Most dictionaries define a story as *a narrative account of a real or imagined event or events*. Mine are usually a mix of the two.

A good story has a single theme, clearly defined, characterization and a well developed plot. There are great word pictures, a variety of sounds and a rhythm in the style. The story must be faithful to its source, and have dramatic appeal. Most of all it must be appropriate to the listeners. (Baker and Greene, Storytelling: Art and Technique: 28)

Listen to this fable of Aesop:

It happened that a Dog had got a piece of meat and was carrying it home in his mouth to eat it in peace. Now on his way home he had to cross a plank lying across a running brook. As he crossed, he looked down and saw his own shadow reflected in the water beneath. Thinking it was another dog with another piece of meat, he made up his mind to have that also. So he made a snap at the shadow in the water, but as he opened his mouth, the piece of meat fell out, dropped into the water and was never seen again.

1. What was the theme?
2. Who were the characters?
3. How was the plot developed?
4. Did any word pictures jump out at you?
5. Were you aware of any rhythm?
6. Did the story have dramatic appeal?
7. Which listeners was it for?

(The theme is contentment with what you have. The character is a Dog. The plot develops as the dog's greed causes him to lose what he has. A marvellous use of word pictures makes us almost hear the dog snapping at his own shadow. Sounds? yes there is the narrator at the start, then the mystery of the plot begins and as it unfolds the sounds change, still keeping the rhythm going.)

In telling this story, your role as the audience was very important - I was drawing the pictures of the tale on your minds. Oral storytelling involves much interaction between the teller and the hearer. One thing to be aware of is that people in this era seem to need more visual stimulation, as storytelling competes with the sophistication of multi media presentations.

In education circles, we have come to expect opposition from some academics when we tell them we assess through storytelling. The reason is that over the past two thousand years, storytelling has been under a cloud of disapproval.

The origins of the anti-story 'movement' can be traced to Plato, whose attack on poetry and narrative has been so successful that modern people might wonder what he had been trying to prove. Aristotle also played a part. He placed emphasis on the taxonomy and classification of what we know.

Scientists began to claim that the experimental method was the sole guide to discovering the truth. Antagonism towards storytelling may have reached a peak in the twentieth century with a determined effort to reduce all knowledge to analytic propositions.

Education systems gave in to the current trends and we have seen a proliferation of abstract syllabi. We may all know of some exceptional teachers who have used storytelling as a teaching tool, but the average teacher stuck to the syllabus. After a school audit visit by the Education Review Office in the mid 1990's, I recall being interrogated by the Principal of my school about a story I had told my class during the lesson. There had been a range of activities including group work, but the story was deemed to be "lecturing" and was frowned upon.

The result of all of this over several thousand years means that there is a cultural, social, intellectual, political and financial superstructure with a vested interest in abstract thinking and communication; a superstructure which is hostile to narrative thinking and narrative modes of communication. The best argument for using storytelling in this century is that to cope with a rapidly changing world where innovation is the key, abstract on its own doesn't help us much. To flourish, innovation needs an environment of rich and complex living. It thrives on connections between things. We can take hold of the inter-relatedness of things and connect them in new ways and we can do this more readily through story than from the perspective of analytic propositions.

There are a number of benefits of storytelling. Firstly, it enables the teller to communicate ideas in a **holistic** way. This results in the assessor being able to hear complex ideas in a very short space of time. Secondly, storytelling is a **natural** way to communicate. We don't have to learn how to do it. Thirdly, it enables us to make **connections** and to make sense of a sequence of events. Fourthly, stories can communicate deep **beliefs.**

In assessing experiential learning, we need an assessment method that does all of this. And we need more than that. Because a story is interactive, the listening is as much an activity as the telling. We call this "deep listening." But for many assessors, training is needed to learn to develop the skills that are required. Training workshops provide the starting point. A take-home pack of exercises fosters continued development for the assessors.

Adopt an Integrated Approach

Although the assessment of attitudes, assumptions and ethics is generally considered to be difficult, we have also found that it can be successfully achieved. One of the suggestions to achieve it is to assess attitudes and ethics in an integrated and holistic way. This means the use of real, or integrated contexts, to measure specific competencies.

Knowledge

Ethics

Understanding

Attitudes

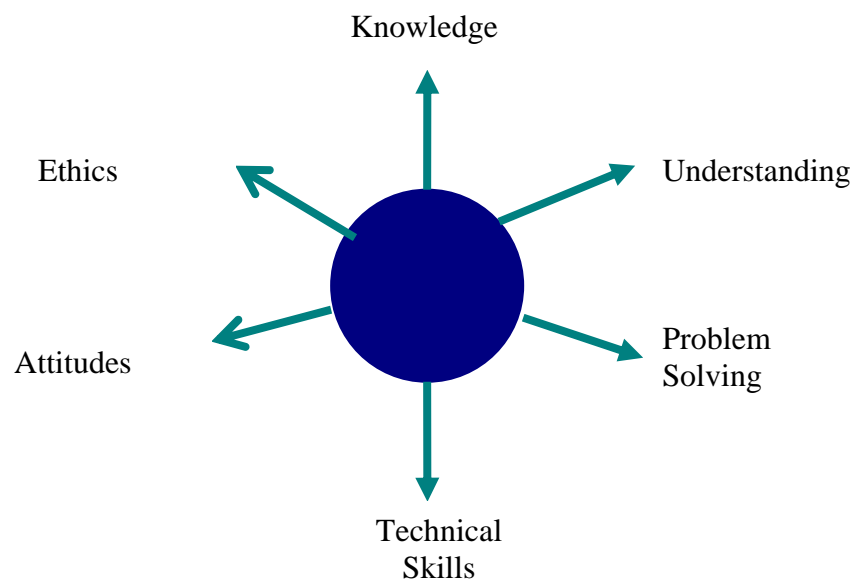Problem Solving

Technical Skills

Fig. 1.1 Gonczi, A. (1993). *Integrated Approaches to Competency Based Assessment*

a) Method - storytelling

The following is a process for determining competency through the use of storytelling and structured questioning. The richness of the evidence generated allows the

assessor to gather data on the candidate's attitudes and ethics within the context of their practice.

b) Discussion - complex storytelling

➢ The use of complex storytelling is based on the idea that candidates can be led through questioning, to explore a complexity of issues from a well-selected episode of practice.

➢ The method is based on the notion that a complex story of practice can be used to assess a range of competencies simultaneously. This is a multifaceted approach to assessment, rather than the linear approach which deals with each unit of competency separately.

➢ The case study approach also demonstrates the interpretation of issues of attitudes, values and ethics.

c) Some pitfalls to note

The interpretation by the assessor may be 'flawed'.

The learning outcomes may not require the assessment of attitudes and ethics

Examples of questions that can lead the candidate to explore complex issues from an episode of practice are shown below:

Question of confirmation.
Eg. '*Can you tell me a challenging time you had (……) and which brought out the best in you?*

Question of investigation
Eg. So how did you work out what had happened?

Question of exploration
(consider further questions to ask)

Question of confirmation
Eg. Can we now review the (units of competency) and see how your story relates to them

Question of investigation
*Eg. I was wondering if you could tell me a bit more about what happened when …..
How did you react to that?*

The thinking framework

Critical reflection plays a major part in the changing of experience into learning. Two key theorists who have contributed significantly to the theoretical background of assessment of prior learning are David Kolb (1983) and Jack Mezirow (1990).

Mezirow (1990, p.xvi) defines critical reflection as "assessment of the validity of the presuppositions of one's meaning perspectives, and examination of their sources and consequences". Critical reflection then involves consciously thinking about one's experiences and reassessing one's beliefs and values and, as Mezirow (1990, p.xvii) states, "thought that involves critical reflection involves learning". The model proposed by Stephen Brookfield (2006) helps us to get a deeper understanding of these ideas. This model is appended as Appendix 2.

Brookfield says that life is a series of decisions, some small, some much larger. We assume our friends will be trustworthy and won't talk about us behind our backs. We assume that the foods we choose to eat are healthy for us, and so on.

These assumptions are sometimes correct. However, says Brookfield, at other times the assumptions we base our decisions on have never been examined. Sometimes we hold them because people we respect (friends, parents, teachers, religious leaders) have said they are right. At other times we have picked the assumptions up as we travel through life but don't know exactly where they came from. To make good decisions in life, he says, we need to be sure that our assumptions are accurate and valid – that they fit the situations and decisions we are facing.

Critical thinking describes the process we use to uncover and check our assumptions. Here is Stephen Brookfield's checklist for critical thinking:

1. Find out what our assumptions are.

    We may know some of these already (those we call explicit assumptions) but others we are unaware of (implicit assumptions). To uncover these implicit assumptions it is often helpful to involve other people (friends, family, work colleagues) who help us see ourselves and our actions from unfamiliar perspectives. Sometimes reading books, watching videos or having new

experiences such as traveling to other cultures, going to college or being an intern help us become aware of our assumptions.

2. Do some research.

Once we know what our assumptions are, we enter the second phase of critical thinking, that of research. We try to check out our assumptions to make sure they are accurate and valid. To do this we also need to consult a wide range of sources – talking to people with experience in the situations in which we find ourselves, reading relevant literature, searching trusted web sites, consulting experts and so on.

2. Apply our findings.

The third and final phase of critical thinking puts the first two stages into practice by applying our analysis to our decisions. Decisions based on critical thinking are more likely to be ones we feel confident about and to have the effects we want them to have.

In summary, Brookfield's critical thinking involves three inter-related phases:

Phase 1: Discovering the assumptions that guide our decisions, actions and choices

Phase 2: Checking the accuracy of these assumptions by exploring as many different perspectives, viewpoints and sources as possible

Phase 3: Taking informed decisions that are based on these researched assumptions (Informed decisions are based on evidence we can trust, can be explained to others and have a good chance of achieving the effects we want)

In *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984), David Kolb agrees that we only learn through continuous experiences and that in so doing we have the capacity to have a here-and-now experience followed by the collection of data and observations about that experience. The data are then analysed and the conclusions of this analysis are <u>feedback</u> to the actors in the experience for their use in the modification of their behaviour and choice of new experiences.
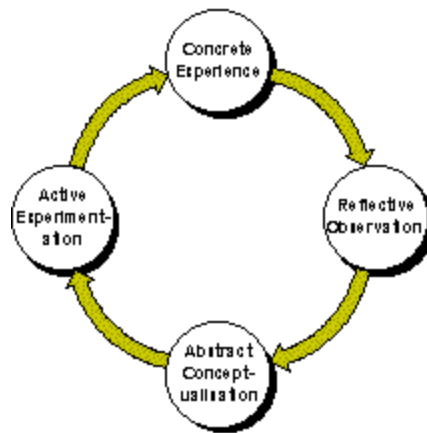
Fig. 1.2 Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984)

This suggests that there are four stages which follow from each other: **Concrete Experience** is followed by **Reflection** on that experience on a personal basis. This may then be followed by deriving general rules describing the experience, or the application of known theories to it (**Abstract Conceptualisation**), and then to constructing ways of modifying the next experience (**Active Experimentation**), leading in turn to the next **Concrete Experience**. All this may happen in a flash, or over days, weeks or months, depending on the topic, and there may be a "wheels within wheels" process at the same time.

The cycle is based on the belief that an experience such as setting a learning goal and proceeding to study does not guarantee that the person will be able to succeed. All four steps in the learning cycle, says Kolb, are necessary in order to learn. The learner must reflect on the experience, relate it to other situations, make a plan to translate the learning into action, and then critically consider the result. Knowledge, then, is created through the transactions that lead to experiences which occur between the person and his/her environment. This is reminiscent of Donald Schon's notion that 'we experience as we reflect, and we reflect as we experience' (in Boud and Walker, 1992:167).

A colleague's comments show that this is part and parcel of the pre-entry counselling:

We have a very difficult case of an intermediate teacher....she is a very closed woman who does nothing outside her work life at all that we can include for assessment, does not contribute to school processes at all, no groups she has run or even been part of, she goes into the classroom for her one subject and does not do ANYTHING else.

A facilitated technique

The structured questioning process attached to the storytelling for assessing competency, adapted and used by the Centres of Assessment of Prior Learning was ddveloped for the Vocational Education and Assessment Centre (Australia) by David and Aptee (VEAC, 1999).

It is based on a facilitated process, a series of steps. These steps are: pre-entry counselling, candidate profiling, consideration of learning and assessment options, decision on options, assessment, granting of credit (if appropriate) and consideration of new learning opportunities (Hornblow, 2000). The facilitated process encourages 'scaffolding' and 'help' interactions and the metacognitive activities of planning (deciding direction), selecting (determining the most important information), connecting (relating new information to known information), tuning (trying out, practising, adjusting new information) and monitoring (checking progress, assessing results).

This scaffolding allows the candidate to explore information, form and test hypotheses while avoiding the wasted experience of blind guesses or actions taken without sufficient understanding of the context.

The 'help' strategies of the facilitated process mirrors the Merrill (1988) options: show me, give me, tell me, provide me.

With storytelling two things are occurring simultaneously:

- providing information
- building a relationship.

In a story about her assessment practices, Jane (not her real name) combines the information about contemporary assessment methods with personal opinions and uses language that begins to build a relationship between her and the assessor:

> In Foundation Studies we don't use norm-referencing. In the old School Certificate assessments that I had quite a bit to do with as a marker, students were ranked on a Bell curve. I have difficulties with that because there is really no difference between the student who gets 49 and one who gets 50, but under norm-referencing one passes, the other doesn't.

As the assessment progresses, she relaxes more and her language becomes increasingly colloquial:

> I have started doing some stuff on unit standards with (organisation deleted) and I like the fact that the students, if they don't meet the standard they can have another bash at it…

The Reporting Phase

Assessors using the professional conversation for assessment write detailed reports outlining how they made the decision that the candidate met the standard required. The quality of these documents is crucial as there is no test paper or other form of evidence that can be checked for consistency. In the early stages of the collaborative project, moderation reports included comments such as:

> There is no comment on the candidate's identification of assessment requirements or purposes. No evidence that the candidate examined the quality of conclusions or impacts of assessment. A reference list was provided but not in any format accepted in academic institutions. No evidence that a critique took place, although there is a mention of notes. If so how was authenticity determined? The unit title is "Reflect critically on assessment" but the assessor has used lower level terminology, such as "descriptions", "discussion", "explanatinn". At level 7 the skills and knowledge demand analysis and critique.

Eleven assessors were being compared and in the beginning there was a great gulf between the best and worst reports, as evident from the next two samples:

Sample 1

Assessors' comments for unit 8760 are still a concern on the whole. Three out of four do not contain sufficient detail to show how they determined that the candidate was competent. The written reports are not tied to the elements of the units and in some cases do not engender confidence that the assessor has understood the unit requirements. There is a concern also that the assessment of candidates is not at the level of the units. Analysis, critique, evaluation and transformation are the backbone of level 7 but language used suggests descriptive presentations. Assessors' reports need to be linked more closely to the judgements required.

Sample 2

The notes support the written report and clearly show that decisions were made based on the criteria. The report is an excellent written document showing clearly how the decision was made in relation to the requirements of the unit.

Appendix 1 provides an example of the type of report required.

Lifelong learning

The most satisfying aspect of our work in relation to the storytelling method of assessment has been the evaluation of the process by the candidates themselves, many of whom have made comments such as this:

I am keen to go on to post graduate studies to further my learning.

I used to feel like the bottom of the pile in the school staffroom, but this experience has shown me that I am one of a new group of experts on curriculum and that I have something to offer the rest of the staff.

A recent telephone call from a high profile school principal has confirmed that what we have been doing has far reaching effects. He said "I wanted you to know that we are holding a celebration morning tea today for the 15 staff who went through your programme. The material you covered aligned perfectly with the goals for

professional development we had for the staff this year, but best of all, people who were once cynical and at the end of their careers, just marking time until they retired, are now keen to try new things."

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Assessor's Report

Candidate: (Name)

Date: 27 October, 2005

Subject Specialisms: 1) Materials Technology
2) Graphics

Recommendation: That (name) be awarded unit standard 8761 on the basis of the evidence provided through storytelling and supporting documentation, as outlined below.

Unit 8761 (Reflect Critically on own Teaching)

(Name) has a clear and appropriate philosophy of teaching and learning. He has been teaching for thirty years and has worked in one school in New Zealand and in five schools overseas during that time. His present role includes being Head of Graphics and Materials Technology. (Name) articulated a philosophy based on the principles of learning being something a student does rather than something that is done to him or her and the idea of lifelong learning. He also believes in the value of play such as the making of jigsaw puzzles and the need for students to learn how to learn. (Name) explained that significant influences on the development of this philosophy have been his mother and his last principal in New Zealand who believed in equity in education.

During this discourse (Name) showed an awareness that his beliefs are consistent with those expressed by other teachers and in educational literature. He also showed an awareness that his philosophy may be better suited to some teaching and learning environments than to others.

(Name) was able to evaluate the effectiveness of his own teaching style with reference to different types of class and in different teaching situations. He described appropriate strategies to better include different types of students in the learning process. His experience living in cultures as diverse as Fiji, the Solomons, Samoa and Australia (as well as New Zealand) has helped his understanding of the needs of his school community, especially Maori students. He believes in the importance of being friendly and showing respect for students' rights and beliefs, including freedom of speech.

(Name) identified a number of professional development goals and explained how important it is for effective teachers to remain engaged in the learning process themselves. He would like to advance further in education and is currently enrolled for a course on student psychology with Waikato University.

Appendix 2

Critical Thinking Process

Stages are not linear, and may overlap

1. Identify Assumptions
2. Check Accuracy & Validity
3. Take alternative Perspectives
4. Take Informed Actions

Be careful not to jump to stage four too quickly

Types of Assumptions

Paradigmatic | Prescriptive | Causal

- Framing
- Structuring

- What Should happen?

- What does happen?

Be sure to not let the context distort the assumption(s).

Critical Reflection Process

Assumptions

Power | Hegemony

Prescriptive

Causal | Paradigmatic

Lenses
- Students
- Theory
- Colleagues
- Autobiography

Utilize all lenses to evaluate assumptions holistically