Who are we without our stories?
The Use of Narrative and Dialogue for Effective Docent Education

by Christine Castle

Stories and the making and telling of stories are not new to those of us who work or play in museums and galleries. Many of us have found them to be an exciting and effective way to enhance the museum experience for our visitors - what Michael Spock has called the “interaction between people and stuff.” However, we have not often applied these lessons to our own teaching and learning as museum workers. In the following presentation I would like to briefly explore with you the meaning of stories, how they have been used in teacher education and how I propose to apply them to the professional development of museum educators, particularly beginning docents, interpreters or guides.

What are stories?

Stories are important because they connect our outer and inner worlds of self. Through them we make sense of life’s paradoxes. They can be personal or fictional and called variously myths, folk tales and legends, although over time the distinction between them is often blurred. However, personal or fictional, all stories have three basic elements: a situation involving some predicament, conflict or struggle; a protagonist; and a plot in which the predicament is solved in some fashion.

We see this most clearly in what Jack Miller has termed the Heroine’s Journey or the “monomyth.” This begins with a call to adventure, followed by separation from the old world or culture. The heroine or hero then undergoes a series of tests and trials until she or he confronts the supreme ordeal. Upon besting the ordeal, our heroine or hero returns to wherever and provides service to the world. All classic tales, says Miller, are based on much the same structure. Think of the movies The Wizard of Oz or Star Wars as modern examples of this journey. And think, for a moment, of whether or not your own personal stories of love, work or play follow similar patterns.

The real “truth” of a story, though, is in the telling. If not shared, a story remains a personal metaphor or private memory. Storytelling promotes the integration of thoughts, ideas and feelings through an understanding of what matters to others - what they feel and think. “Without this synthesis of thought, intuition and emotion, this symbiosis of teller and listener, there is no tale. The one who listens is exposed to the impact of the tale. It is possible for one’s whole life to be changed by a story told at a crucial time by someone whom we respect and trust. For the effect of the tale rests not only with its content but also in the timing of the telling, and abides above all within the relationship between teller and listener. This is what the ancient people knew. Such is the power of stories.”

Narrative is this “making of meaning from personal experience via a process of reflection in which storytelling is the key element and in which metaphor and folk knowledge take their place.” By studying narrative we assume that “the way people talk about their lives is of significance, that the language they use and the connections they make reveal the world they see and in which they act.” In doing so, we better understand our own story. Our personal vision attains meaning in relation to the stories of another, to the stories of our many cultures and communities, and to our global story. In meeting with one another to reflect on reality as we make and remake it, we engage in dialogue out of which may come recognition of the “way each one of us
reorganizes, reassesses, realigns our life experience so that it is continually integrated into our lives. By this process, say Witherell and Brody, we give voice to ourselves.

**Story and Narrative in Teacher Education**

Like museum educators, classroom teachers have always used stories to instruct and to entertain. Only recently, however, have educators begun to consider why and how stories can help teacher teach. It can be observed in virtually every school or museum staff room that experienced teachers exchange stories of their personal practice – teacher lore or “war stories.” The core knowledge of teachers comes from their experiences. It may also be that in a female-dominated profession this narrative mode is a female way of knowing and seeing. But that is a subject for another paper. Yet teacher lore is not simply a description of the facts of the event but is a story built upon the teller’s previous experiences, expectations and ways of interpreting, his or her biography, really. As I have pointed out above, the power of the story lies in the interaction between the teller and the listener. If the listener does not share these experiences, expectations and ways of interpreting as, for example, pre-service teachers or docents in training would not then a very different story may emerge. The “connected knowing,” or the linking of theory to practice, which veteran teachers demonstrate is often missing in the novice. Yet, like experts in every field, educators tend to forget the extent of their own learning and discoveries and, therefore, often fail to provide assistance to the novice in making meaning from stories of experience. How can professional education provide the “personal, practical knowledge” necessary to make sense of stories? Is there any substitute for experience?

Witherell and Brody explored one way in which this might be accomplished through their graduate-level professional studies course for inexperienced educators. They sought to create a community of inquirers who would “search for shared meaning” in stories through the exploration of issues of purpose, meaning and knowing that would serve the needs of “real people, in real situations, struggling with real problems.”

Connectedness, trust and teamwork were critical themes in the development of the course. The format which the course ultimately took was consistent from week to week and was as follows. The team teachers first reflected on the themes and issues that had emerged for them from the assigned readings. Readings included teacher biographies, autobiographies and narrative fiction relating to the week’s topic. This was followed by general class comments and discussion. The class then divided into small groups, each led by a class member who presented a prepared five-to-ten-minute reflective essay on the themes and issues that had held meaning for him or her, again followed by small group discussion. Throughout the course, students were also required to keep a dialogical journal containing critical personal reflections of the course, and the students’ own stories as they evolved. The authors deem their model a success according to their mission: “In the sharing of life stories and dilemmas of the workplace, we have come closer to understanding the ‘other’ as ourselves, to understand the ‘familiar hearts of strangers.’”

A second, more formal, example is the Case Method for teacher training proposed by Lee Shulman. It is a more deliberate attempt to frame the issues and themes of a problem within a single story. In it, a case of something is first defined and narrated in the first person in a case report. The case study itself is then a third-person account of what happened, as described in the case report. Upon reflection and analysis, case studies provide the student with a sense of what problems he or she might encounter – what problems look like, what causes them and what approaches are effective. Judith Shulman contends that cases supplement pedagogical theory by showing the “speculative, contingent character of teaching” and that thought, feeling and action are inseparable.
CONCLUSIONS

So, can story and narrative make a productive contribution to the effective education of novice docents? I believe they can, as a complement to subject-based instruction and practice. I am testing that theory in the reorganization and development of a course in which I have the privilege of teaching and learning with novice docents and interpreters. In the past we have explored story making through the experiences of the class as museum visitors. This year [1995] I hope to supplement ongoing role playing, touring practice and field trips with opportunities to read or hear and then analyze the stories and case studies of working museum educators. In order to do this I have begun to collect published stories of docents in action and to record stories of critical cases that might illustrate professional museum practice for the course participants. I have recently completed an eight-week study with the interpretive staff at Historic Fort York and hope to do future work with docents and interpreters in gallery and natural settings. The new method of teaching will be piloted this fall [1995] at the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto.

As museum educators we spend a great deal of time and effort in trying to better understand our audiences and our collections, which is essential to making that spark between people and stuff happen. But do we not owe it to the next generation of museum educators, docents, interpreters, guides and hosts — and, ultimately, to our visitors — to spend a little of that energy understanding ourselves?

NOTES

6. Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 280
16. Ibid., 264
17. Ibid., 277