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Coping with resistance

Storyline in adult education[1]

The Storyline approach was originally created to meet the demands of the Scottish Primary Memorandum in the sixties of the last century. It aimed at improving primary school teaching and most educators familiar with the concept will think of Storyline as an adequate pedagogy for children from 5 to 12 years. So what use is there in looking for an applicability of Storyline to adult education? Back in the sixties when behaviourist ideas dominated teaching and learning, the answer would have clearly been: None! The predominant view would have been that grown-up persons whose experiential background completely differs from that of children, need different stimuli to succeed in learning and achieving the stated educational objectives. Nowadays learning is mostly viewed as a process of actively generating knowledge and abilities – whether the learner is a child or an adult. Today’s answer would probably be: Just try! Since Storyline offers broad opportunities for creating learning environments that enhance active appropriation of complex content it should work with any sort of student. But does it really? As there is comparatively little experience with Storyline in adult education, this paper does not try to give a systematic answer to the question how and why Storyline can be applied in this context. It is rather a description of experiences that have been gathered over the past 25 years and may contain a few hints for the interested practitioner.

Some examples

Apart from teachers being taught how to use it in their own classes, the first adults who experienced Storyline in the students’ role were parents worried about the academic achievement of their children. Back in the sixties when in some schools the belt[2] still ruled, many parents had severe difficulties imagining that their children, who were suddenly taught in a modern way, learned anything at all. What the heck was all this about – storytelling, making box models, using collage figures, painting and singing? Teachers, insecure about what to tell these parents, asked the in-service department of the Jordanhill College of Education for advice. Instead of giving sophisticated academic explanations Steve Bell, Sallie Harkness and Fred Rendell decided to invite the parents into the school one evening and let them carry out a few

[1] The author is extremely grateful to Rebecca Plaskitt for suggesting many alterations and correcting a great number of mistakes in an earlier version of this paper.

[2] In other countries it was mostly the cane; in Scotland a leather belt was used for the corporal punishment of pupils who didn’t meet the high standards of compliance.

of the practical exercises they were so worried about. Their magic worked.[3] As soon as the adults discovered that there was sense in what they were doing and that they themselves were the ones giving meaning to these activities they were hooked by this modern learning approach which uses one of the oldest "means of constructing a world"[4]: the narrative. Sometimes they had to be told to hurry because the janitor was about to lock the school building, but they asked for just another minute to attach a small twisted cord to a tiny telephone set formed out of modelling clay.

Another experience orally reported by the Jordanhill in-service team was a course for policemen who were trained to visit schools and support teachers in traffic education, inform children about the risks of following invitations by strangers, or enhance law-abiding behaviour. Like the courses for teachers this took the form of double loop learning: the policemen were taught the same way they were supposed to work with the children. So they had to learn how to make and use collage figures and various other products pupils would produce in Storyline lessons. Accustomed to following the orders of superiors, the policeman on the course dutifully carried out the activities they were asked to do. The climate in the beginning was far from the casual workshop atmosphere you normally encounter in Storyline classes. The participants wore their buttoned-up uniforms and sat uncomfortably at their desks. Communication took the form of questions like, "Excuse me, captain, would you please pass me the glue?" But the deeper they were engaged in the activities and the more fun they had, the more jokes emerged. The policemen experienced that laughter is not – as in traditional teaching – an impediment to learning but a supporting factor. About an hour later the uniform jackets were stashed away, sleeves rolled up, and the talk became rather informal, "Hey Jack, can you spare the scissors for a moment?"

Probably the first practitioner of Storyline who used the approach to teach adults who were not getting to know the method for their own teaching purposes, was Finn Mosegaard from Skive, Denmark. At the end of the eighties he taught a group of unemployed women who wanted to return to the labour market. The idea was to get the participants to create a model of a job ("en Arbejdsplads") they would like to work in – as employees or as free lancers.[5] Just as in a primary class the women started by creating persons looking for a job and giving their character a name, a biography, an observable appearance and so on. On the second morning quite a few of the women reported they had told their husbands about the teaching methods and had been laughed at or – even worse – had been asked whether they were really going to

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[3] This magic is more deeply explained in Schwänke (2006), p. 36.

[4] Bruner 1990, p. 56. Bruner, who describes his own work as an "effort to establish meaning as the central concept of psychology" (p. 2) continues: " The typical form of framing experience (and our memory of it) is in narrative form, and Jean Mandler [Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory. Hillsdale, N.J. 1984] has done us the service of drawing together the evidence showing that what does *not* get structured narratively suffers loss in memory" (p. 56).

[5] Cf. Mosegaard 1990.

attend this kindergarten activity any longer. So the whole operation was on the verge of failing from the beginning. Instead of explaining the advantages of Storyline, Finn merely asked for one more day. The deal was: We continue with the course in my way until this evening. If then you are still convinced that it is a waste of time we will work with a different method from tomorrow morning on. As it turned out this was a wise suggestion because at the end of that very day, the students had experienced what they had been lacking in their time of unemployment: respect, solidarity, cooperation, fun, and a newly acquired self-esteem. In just two days they had gathered enough assertiveness to face their husbands and insist on completing the course in the "Scottish way".

Similar experiences are reported about Storyline courses with hairdressers[6], nurses[7] or staff of nursing homes.[8] I have run Storyline courses with unemployed adults from diverse job backgrounds (mainly blue collar), held workshops with teachers of evening classes and taught apprentices in one of the major German health funds using elements of Storyline. In all these cases there was initially a short period of confusion or insecurity by the participants followed by a much longer time span of joyful and dedicated active work. So it might be proposed that the Storyline method can work with adults.

But can everyone who is teaching adults trust this "mechanism"? What if there is a strong resistance? Should fears or concerns on the side of the students be anticipated? Are there contexts where Storyline does not fit well? Are special learning conditions required? I will endeavour to answer at least some aspects of these questions drawing on my own work in adult education and on some widely used concepts of dealing with resistance.

The hidden curriculum

Most teachers are familiar with the fact that in all learning arrangements outcomes are reached that did not appear in the official curriculum.[9] For example, we want pupils to learn not to cheat during a test, but they may learn that cheating is o.k. provided they are not caught. We teach the rules of democracy whereas at the same time decision-making in the class may be mainly done by the teacher; so pupils learn to distrust political postulates (which after all seems not to be the worst result of

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[6] Cf. von der Lieth (1998) who taught in further education using the Storyline "Founding a hairdressers' salon".
[7] This example was reported by Linda Schumann-Scheel at the Golden Circle Conference near Rejkjavik in 2002.
[8] Cf. Klapper/Kojer/Schwänke 2007 who report about a curriculum funded by the Robert Bosch foundation. This curriculum employs the story of an old woman moving into a nursing home where she is looked after for some time and eventually dies after having experienced the benefits of palliative care.
[9] This idea was first expressed by John Dewey in "Democracy and Education", the term "hidden curriculum" was first used by Philip Jackson in an essay called "Life in Classrooms" (1968) and then used by Benson R. Snyder as title for a book in 1970.

schooling even though it is not on the curriculum). In addition, most persons who attended formal education for a number of years are convinced that

- learning must not be fun
- what is taught at school has little meaning in real life
- the teacher is the active person in class stuffing content into the pupils' heads.

Such convictions have never been declared or reflected as educational objectives but they tend to influence future learning situations, even if they differ characteristically from those experienced in one's own past. So we can't expect adults to embrace any new way of learning without hesitation. This applies even more seriously if the students have a personal history of school failure. If previous learning was unpleasant, maybe even a detested activity, adult learners must first forget (or rather: *un-learn*) what they thought to be the truth about learning. This works best if they can experience learning as joyful and rewarding.

Time

Many teachers argue that active learning as practised in project work, case studies, problem-based learning, or Storyline would be great to do but is much too time-consuming. Given a certain syllabus to be communicated in a fixed time many teachers, especially in adult education, take the emergency exit and fill the whole content into a power-point presentation – the advantage being that there is an apparent proof that everything has been "taught". It is difficult to resist this temptation but not impossible. As soon as a teacher accepts the role of a learning facilitator, she will be more prone to watch the different learning strategies of the students and to support their efforts to fulfil a given task. Only then should time become an issue. It is not unlikely that students used to traditional teaching, complain about the waste of time when first confronted with Storyline. From my experience it is not advisable to contradict this perception but rather shift the emphasis from the expense to the gain. Whenever humans learn, they are investing time, effort and often money. These investments are the items that have to be compared with the outcomes of the learning process – in quality and quantity. As these outcomes can usually not be foreseen in the beginning of the learning unit, it seems best to postpone this comparison until the whole unit is finished. Once it has become clear that cognitive as well as affective objectives have been reached, students very rarely complain about a waste of time. On the other hand we know that Storyline activities need at least *some* time. So when planning a series of Storyline-lessons the teacher should see to it that learners as well as teachers are aware of the necessary investment of time.

Responsibility

If learning is understood as active construction of knowledge, learners are responsible for their learning outcomes. That does not mean teachers can fulfill their jobs from a laid-back position. They still define a great part of the learning conditions and most of the learning environment. But the outcomes achieved under these conditions depend mostly on the students. Man is a learning animal and is virtually learning all day long, but what is learned is often dictated by the hidden curriculum the learner himself is part of. So it should be made clear from the beginning who is responsible for the achievements. This is especially important when working with learners who have only had a small amount of formal education (e.g. migrant workers) or are looking back upon a history of failure at school. These persons tend to view themselves as constant underachievers. So before starting to learn they should become acquainted with the effects of a negative self-concept and decide whether they want to go on proving to themselves that they will never make it – and that they will have to live with the consequences of this decision.

Cooperation and emotional learning

If adults talk of learning they mostly think of educational objectives belonging to the cognitive domain. Learning is something individuals do to acquire the necessary knowledge for a successful life. This utilitarian view often disregards the fact that learning almost always includes a social and an emotional component. Storyline is very much aware of this aspect. So the social situation in the classroom is frequently changed: students learn in small groups, in pairs, individually or within a whole class. They have to cooperate to fulfill certain tasks whereas other activities can be carried out alone. Adults who are not fond of teamwork will sometimes doubt the use of group work or other forms of cooperation. In order to prevent this kind of resistance, the teacher should offer enough opportunities to reflect on the learning process, preferably not only at the end of a learning unit but also during the process – especially if the students start asking critical questions about the teaching methods.

Proper content

Contrary to project work Storyline uses simulation of reality where it is difficult for the learner to create reality itself – you can teach children how to bake bread or biscuits but you cannot set up a bakery at school. For adults this discrimination also applies: e.g. it is much simpler to learn how to run a simulated company than to start a real one. Most important is the fact that the content should matter to the students, whether they be young or adult. So what is a suitable content for teaching adults using Storyline? Some ideas that have successfully been carried out with university students are:

- Starting a training agency, for instance an evening school

- Forming a European network of institutions of social welfare

In further education it is equally simple to set up models of institutions. The following have been used on different occasions:

- a hairdressers' salon
- a job centre treating its unemployed clients as customers – not applicants
- a network of freelancers
- a health fund
- a hospital ward
- a nursing home
- an international youth hostel

In all these cases it proved not to be a problem that it wasn't the "real thing" because the students quickly realized that working on a model gives much more freedom to test or implement new and possibly risky ideas.

Resistance

As mentioned before some adult students accept Storyline settings from the beginning but many are skeptical and some are even unwilling to work in the proposed way. Before discussing how to deal with these malcontent students I suggest having a look at the roots of resistance. A very simple model of personality can help to explain what I mean: the "water lily model" (see figure 1).

What we perceive about students (or generally about other people) is the following: behaviour or actions we can observe or results that are achieved. These are represented by the blossom and the leaves of the water lily which are above the surface. We know less about the underlying motives of the students' behaviour,

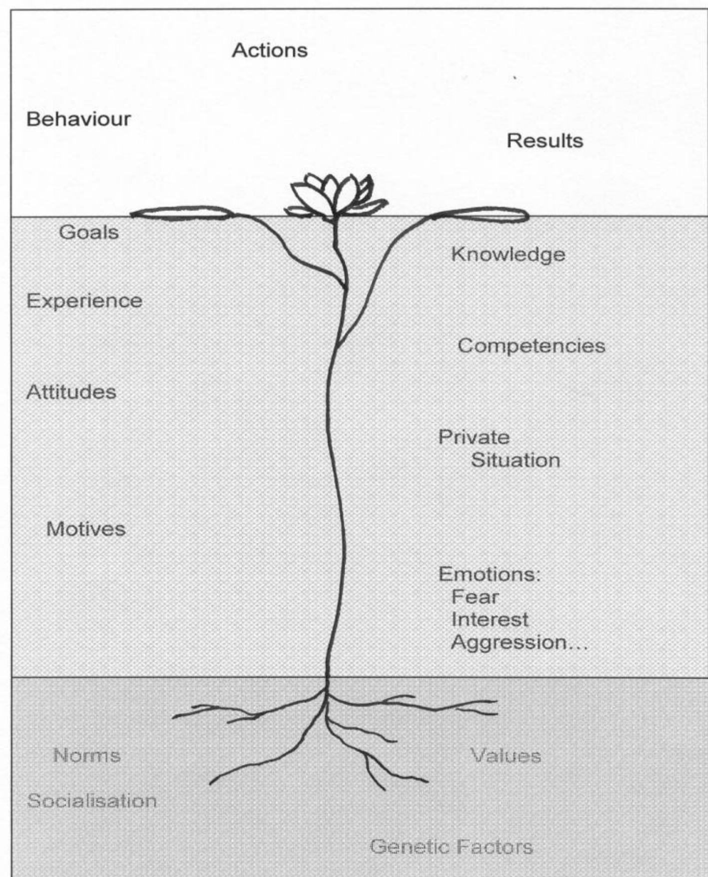


Figure 1: Water lily model

about knowledge and abilities, ideas, imagination, attitudes, aims, emotions and so on – similarly it's difficult to see the submerged parts of the water lily. Even more difficult if not impossible, it is to identify ingrained values, religious beliefs, or genetic dispositions of the individual. These qualities are inaccessible to observation as are the roots of the water lily covered by soil.

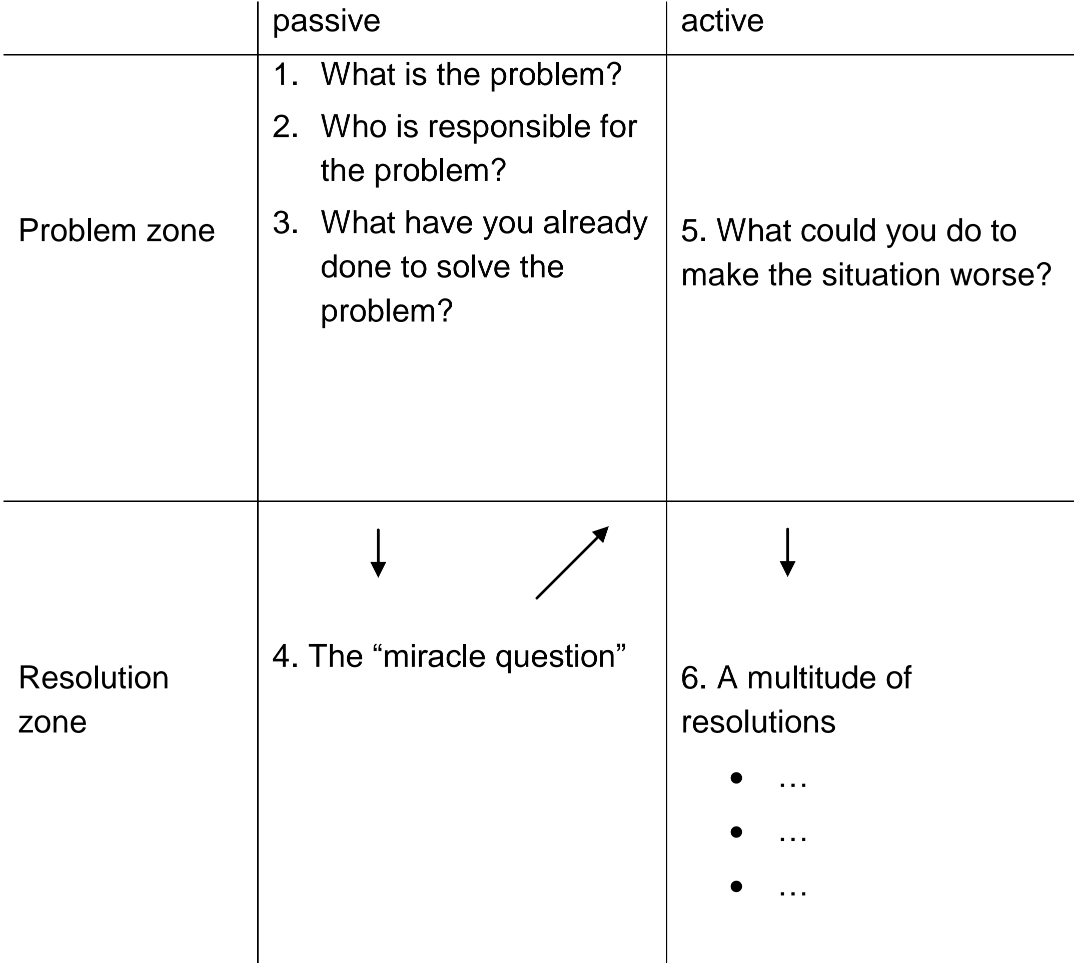
This simple model suggests that items which are easily observed can also be more readily influenced by others. For example,if a person resists the task of creating a collage figure out of scrap materials and glue, one reason may be that he or she is afraid of spoiling their clothes with glue. A second reason might be that the person remembers doing such things poorly at school, so he or she will not be inclined to repeat that disagreeable experience. A third possible reason might be that the religious beliefs of the person do not allow the fabrication of pictures showing human beings.

In case no. 1 it will be helpful to offer a protective overall or an apron. In case no. 2 encouragement by the teacher might overcome the resistance even though this will be more difficult than in the first case. In case no. 3 it will be almost impossible to overpower the resistance and – even more importantly – it is not desirable, because urging someone to act against his or her convictions will almost always result in even stronger resistance. So the nearer we get to the "roots" of the individual's personality, the more difficult it will be to overcome resistance against new and unfamiliar learning activities that contrast to former experiences. Then it is often advisable to accept the resistance instead of trying to impose one's will upon the student. The best way to do this is to present a question that does not ask for an apology. You might ask, "What other activity might meet the same purpose? What would help you to get along with your aims?" As most people are willing to contribute to a community they are part of, most students will not resist continually but after some time will rejoin the group process.

On occasion you encounter a whole group of people who do not accept a teacher's suggestion – a preferred argument might be that the teacher does not explain in advance what purpose there will be for a certain activity. For the teacher to give such an explanation is sometimes difficult and sometimes not advisable because Storyline, in many cases, enables the students to learn by discovery – an access that may be spoiled if explanations are given in advance.

Instead the teacher can apply a technique that has proved useful in solving complex problems, especially problems that are allegedly created by others. The idea behind this approach is the observation that many people would rather endure a problematic situation for quite some time than actively work on the solution because complaining about one's difficulties can make a person feel better. But as Petrarca said, "Constant moaning doesn't avert hardship." So if a group of adults starts

lamenting, one should direct their energy towards resolutions. It has proved best to visualize the quest for adequate solutions in the way depicted in figure 2.



	passive	active
Problem zone	1. What is the problem? 2. Who is responsible for the problem? 3. What have you already done to solve the problem?	5. What could you do to make the situation worse?
Resolution zone	↓ ↗ 4. The “miracle question”	↓ 6. A multitude of resolutions • … • … • …

Figure 2: Portfolio for problem solving

The two columns of the portfolio indicate the way the problem is being tackled: actively or rather in a suffering way. The lines define whether the steps of the quest for resolutions belong to the problem or to the resolution area.

Now let’s have a look at the “problem” of adults being asked to engage in “kindergarten activities”. First you ask for the problem and the answer will probably be, “We don’t like to do what you want us to do.” The second question identifies the person responsible for the unpleasant situation: usually the teacher. The third question appeals to the responsibility of the students, but the honest answer will most likely be, “If we don’t like it, we don’t do it – that’s the way it always has been.” Resolutions at this stage often take the form of “more of the same” (cf. Watzlawick

1974). In our example, “Do as the other teachers do, teach us the normal way but leave us alone.” Given this mindset, if the teacher is not ready to accept the resistance, the “miracle question” can help. It reads, “Imagine a miracle is going to happen tonight and our problem is solved, what would be different?” This question shouldn’t be used too often but in severe cases it can help a lot. The students might answer that the teacher will have changed overnight. (This answer should not be accepted as it is actually an answer to question no. 3.) Other ideas might suggest that somehow it becomes fun to do what one used to detest, that the teacher is imposing unbearable force upon the students or that in order to prevent the worst, the class just gives in and so on. Note: The answers to the miracle question very seldom provide a suitable resolution because you are still on the passive side of the portfolio; the students can still view themselves as victims.

Now it is time for the fifth question which normally inspires a lot of creativity because there are always ways to make a situation worse, e.g. not listen to the teacher at all, resist all of the teacher’s ideas, stop participating in any common activity, complain to the teacher’s superior, walk out of the class and so on. Once these answers are collected and written down, the students can no longer deny that they do have a certain influence on the situation they view as problematic. But if they have an influence to make it worse, they logically also have an influence to make it better. It is at this point that is seems sensible to insist on the responsibility of the students and to ask for real resolutions, for instance:

- Let’s try it the teacher’s way for a given time (as in the example from Finn Mosegaard mentioned earlier).
- Let us carry out the suggested activity and then have a break and reflect whether the learning process was really helpful.
- Let’s ask the teacher for alternative activities and then decide on the least disagreeable one from our view.
- Let us write down individually the most impressive learning experiences of our life – not necessarily at school. Then let’s share our experiences and decide what to do next. (There is a good chance that some students will report about a situation in which they learned something by discovery, by actively trying out, by experimenting and so on.)

So the students find out that contrary to their original assumption there are a number of resolutions, and some of them might not be so bad after all. Additionally the students take the insight that there is normally more than one resolution to any given problem.

To summarize the different ways of coping with resistance: there are a variety of options for the teacher confronted with students who don’t see a point in doing what they are asked to do:

- Don’t work against the resistance – follow it, accept and respect the students’ feelings.
- Respect the resisting persons and their personal experience – from their point of view they have a good reason to behave the way they do.
- Give the students enough time to adjust to the unfamiliar learning process.
- Keep in mind that in many cases resistance is due to unpleasant memories (like having to paint, to fold paper, to build models – but never having been able to meet the teachers’ expectations…).
- Remember the hidden curriculum – even teachers who know about its existence usually have a personal curriculum even hidden to themselves.
- If possible, find out where the resistance (sometimes even rage) comes from. Ask for reasons, experiences, feelings, or for ideas about how to get on.
- Let the students make their own experiences.
- Let them watch the others having fun.
- Keep open to surprises. Von der Lieth (p. 27) for instance observed two young women in further education who were supposed to build a hairdressers’ salon. They arrived late in the morning, started slowly and reluctantly to work and as soon as the bell rang they were off for the interval normally lasting half an hour. But after ten minutes they were back! They had left to postpone their dates and then hurried back because they didn’t want to miss a minute of the lesson. The ice had cracked.

After reflecting on the previous examples of Storyline facilitators and the experiences of adults that have been taught using this method, there appears to be sufficient support for Storyline being adapted to adult education. But, one might ask, don’t we already possess enough methods for teaching adults, approaches like problem-based learning, business games or project work? Well – thinking of the endless hours that adults in universities, companies or in further education spend watching power point presentations where short projected texts are additionally read out, one might start to wish for a richer portfolio of methods. But – and this is even more important – no teaching method will be successful on its own because it is applying certain techniques. This is also true for Storyline as well as for the above described “techniques” of coping with resistance. What makes the difference is the attitude of the teacher towards his or her students whatever their age. If the teacher’s attitude is characterized by perfect appreciation for the learners, by respect for their ideas and experiences and by the belief that teaching means learning together with the students, then there is a good chance that the students will engage in learning activities that extend further and affect them more deeply than just sitting and listening. In this respect Storyline will prove to be a valuable instrument for teaching

adults even if they might be astonished by the initial procedures. It is not likely to be the preferred approach for all learning situations, but it provides an enrichment of teaching methods that make the student – and what they contribute from their past – the centre of the learning process.

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