

Culture and Education: Storytelling as a reflective tool for critical thinking

Mark J. R. Wakefield, Ph.D.

DLAC-UTAD/ CETAPS-FLUP¹

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Abstract— *The power of storytelling is acknowledged as having a powerful capacity to help readers think about characters and reflect on their own lives through the experiences of the characters explored in such tales. Having been part of the cultural character of the wider human community from time immemorial, storytelling retains its strong capacity to inspire critical reflection. This paper seeks to explore the relationship between storytelling and critical thinking and how one can stimulate the other and expose the overall benefits such an exercise can produce.*

Keywords— *education, culture, English literature, critical thinking, reflective practice*



Introduction

It is most interesting to examine two very important instruments for educational strategies: storytelling and critical thinking. Each of these contains a wealth of avenues that can be explored for different purposes. My focus will be on how they can be used together to suitably equip both students and their teachers to format their thinking so as to demand more of themselves and to receive more from their experiences, particularly in respect of their reading of stories.

Defining Critical Thinking

Before going any further, however, I would like to examine what is understood by the term ‘critical thinking’. What does it involve? In the first instance, research and practice tell us that some of the most frequently cited terms in respect of ‘critical thinking’ include ‘reasoning’, ‘logic’, ‘judgment’, ‘metacognition’, ‘reflection’, ‘questioning’ and ‘mental processes’.

A more specific definition would be something like one provided by Diane Halpern who observes that:

Critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is used to describe thinking

that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed—the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions, when the thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective for the particular context and type of thinking task.

(Halpern, 2003: 6)

If we look at the essentials of this definition, we can see that the key here is that we have a particular objective in mind and that we use a logical approach to resolve difficulties, make connections and estimate probabilities about different possible outcomes and their likely effects on the path forward that we wish to take.

Research carried out by Kate Wilson (2016) also affirms the role of critical thinking in the creation and stimulation of ‘higher order skills such as interpreting, identifying logical fallacies, analysing cause and effect, synthesising claims, making inference and predictions, evaluating and problem solving’ (Wilson, 2016: 258). Similarly, Davies and Barnett (2015) refer to how critical thinking also incorporates ‘self-reflection’ and ‘self-regulation’ as these prepare students to become ‘independent and inquisitive seekers of understanding’ (cited in Wilson, 2016: 258). In a world wearisome of purported ‘fake news’ and its noxious effects,

¹ <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3069-8310>

critical thinking skills have become ever-more important in determining the veracity of information given that the internet has now become the primary source of information and this requires great caution. As such, critical thinking is regarded as an essential asset of the educational process that provides a strong impetus for the effective cognitive development of learners (Wiwikananda and Susanti, 2022: 356).

Storytelling as a reflective tool

Storytelling then provides an excellent context to consider specific possible situations, how different characters cope with their predicament and provides opportunities to learn from the lessons offered in those tales. How does this work? The literature contains a wealth of information in respect of what storytelling can do to improve thinking skills. One approach affirms that 'Storytelling encourages students to analyze narratives, solve problems presented within the story, reflect on diverse perspectives, and engage in ethical and logical reasoning—all of which are key components of critical thinking' (Xushvaqtova, 2024: 138).

By employing storytelling as an active teaching tool in the classroom, teachers can create a hospitable environment for the advancement of learning for students for such key tenets of critical thinking skills in an interactive and memorable way. We can identify three clear features of this process:

1. *Cognitive Engagement* – this is where stories stimulate the learner in from both an emotional and intellectual perspective that solicits reactions about plot developments, character stances, and the consequences that come from the decisions made by the characters;
2. *Problem-Solving*: A large variety of stories are concerned with difficulties and dilemmas that present ideal opportunities for students to think about solutions to those situations and in so doing, build and refine their problem-solving capacities;
3. *Empathy and Perspective-Taking*: the context of storytelling creates an imaginative space in which students are brought into contact with different viewpoints and this stimulates their ability to empathize and reflect on situations from many different perspectives (Xushvaqtova, 2024: 138).

These three key areas are essential features of the practice of critical thinking and provide a strong probability that learners will successfully develop the necessary attitudes and disposition to be effective critical thinkers.

Storytelling is a powerful strategy as it also provides the means to socialize younger learners into particular ways of thinking and value systems and this in turn determines how they view the world. In effect, it represents a mechanism that "constructs our sense of reality and a filter through

which we process each event that confronts us every day" (Moore, 2013: 65). Moreover, since life presents each person with a myriad of experiences, storytelling provides students with the skills to navigate complex rhetorical situations (Boyce, 1996: 68) as well as elements such as 'inferences, suspense, exploring themes, generic symbols thinking and literary terms' that encourage learners to think about meaning and comprehension (Mello, 2011: 45) and this in turn affords greater development of students' communication and cultural comprehension skills, which nurture the growth of critical thinking skills (Shrestha, 2024: 2).

The act of reading a story, or hearing a story is not simply an act of entertainment. It represents a great deal more as we have discussed. As learners are involved in the process of hearing and retelling stories they become familiarised with the concept of a story and gain an understanding of the fact that a story has a beginning, a middle and an end, this then allows them to learn how to understand the concept of sequencing in a meaningful way as they hear and re-tell stories themselves. As they progress through this process, learners start to question the motives of the characters in these stories with the appropriate prompts from their teachers. Following on from this, learners gain the ability to identify heroes and antiheroes and eventually they create their own characters. Such a process affords learners to apply progressively more complex higher-order thinking skills and this means they become metacognitively aware of the process of their own learning as they assume the role of developing storytellers that ultimately leads them to assuming a principal part "in creating or constructing new knowledge" (Palmer et. al. 2001: 200).

Storytelling as part of the human condition

Thus far, we have looked at storytelling as part of the learning process in isolation. However, storytelling fulfils a far greater and wider role than merely an instrument of learning. To some thinkers and researchers alike, storytelling or in their words 'narration' – represents symbolic actions, where words and deeds have a particular order and meaning for those are part of the world or system that live, create and interpret them. As Alasdair MacIntyre would have it: "Man is in his actions and practice, as well as his fictions, essentially a storytelling animal" where "enacted dramatic narrative is the basic and essential genre for characterisation of human actions." This means that storytelling should not be confined to fictive contexts and that means that it has direct relevance to 'stories of living and to stories of the imagination' (Fisher, 1987: 58).

The realm in which this discussion has been labelled 'Narration as a Paradigm of Human Communication' defended by Walter Fisher as being concerned with that:

...that human communication should be viewed as historical as well as situational, as stories or accounts competing with other stories or accounts purportedly constituted by good reasons, as rational when the stories satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and as inevitably moral inducements...

(Fisher, 1987: 58)

Fisher's remarks remind us that stories provide ideal imagined situations in which we can interrogate certain ideas and observe the actions of given characters motivated by particular moral principles and expected familiar structures within stories as against other stories. Different stories compete for legitimate interpretation of meaning and provide the occasion and instrument to interrogate a wide variety of concepts such what should be regarded as right and for whom and what goals are legitimate achieved by what means.

Storytelling then provides a powerful means to challenge what is known as the 'narrative paradigm' which strongly questions the assumption that human communication – assuming we can believe it is in fact rhetorical in nature – has to be argumentative in its form, that reason can only be attained through discourse of a particular kind characterised by unmistakably distinct ways of inference and implication and that the rules for the evaluation of rhetorical communication necessarily must be logical values found derived solely from informal or formal logic (Fisher, 1987: 58).

Looking closer at this idea of the narrative paradigm, we can see that storytelling has a very powerful role to play in characterising its operation and its content. A modern and evolving society requires the presence and involvement of qualified people in the public decision-making process and for this to happen, citizens (both current ones and those who will become those people in the future) must share a common language, an understanding of argumentative issues and the different ways to engage in reasoning and the ability to assess and question the ideas that come about as part of this process. As Fisher observes:

there must exist something that can be called public or social knowledge and there must be a "public" for argument to have the kind of force envisioned for it...Because the rational-world paradigm has these requirements and because being rational (being competent in argument) must be learned, the historic mission of education in the West has been to generate a consciousness of national and institutional community and to instruct citizens in at least the rudiments of logic

and rhetoric.

(Fisher, 1987: 60)

The notion of this so-called 'rational-world paradigm' stands as a powerful reminder that critical thinking must remain at the heart of our efforts at educating future citizens and indeed, current ones. Storytelling provides a wealth of linguistic and ideational opportunities to propel this process forward and as it does so it ensures that the citizens of tomorrow are at least given good examples of characters in situations that provide moral and civic lessons on how to deal with the challenges of everyday life in an ever-changing world.

Further interrogation of the notion of the narrative paradigm reveals its connection to Bormann's concepts of "fantasy themes" and "rhetorical visions". Fantasy is a technical term that means "the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfils a psychological or rhetorical needs". (Here we can see the clear role of storytelling once more). For their part, fantasy themes come about "in group interaction out of a recollection of something that happened to the group in the past or a dream of what a group might do in the future". Taken together, they become what have been referred to as "rhetorical visions" that are translated into dramatic stories that represent the fabric of social reality for their creators, which are ultimately "rhetorical fictions" that are products of fact and faith which represent a persuasive set of principles rather than purely make-believe worlds of the imagination (Fisher, 1987: 63).

The role of creative texts in language learning: critical avenues?

The companion volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages issued by the Council of Europe in 2020 makes specific mention of 'creative texts.' They are mentioned in the context of being the main source of "Reading as a leisure activity" – this affords the opportunity for students to expand beyond the limit confines of the class contact hours prescribed by curricular standards and legal provisions for class time. Fortunately, the companion ascribes an expansive vision of what reading of literature should encompass as a broad category of texts including 'film, theatre, recitals and multimodal installations' that function as 'works of imagination and cultural significance' (Council of Europe, 2020: 105). The authors of the text point out that such creative texts generally successfully elicit a reaction and arguably this aids the process of reflection that begins the process of critical thinking.

The authors assert that there are four main responses to the ideas and information presented in the target texts which broadly cover the following:

1. Engagement – giving a personal reaction to the language, style or content, feeling drawn to an aspect of the work or a character or characteristic of it;
2. Interpretation – ascribing meaning or significance to aspects of the work including content, motifs, character motives, metaphor, etc.;
3. Analysis of certain aspects of the work including language, literary devices, context, characters, relationships, etc.
4. Evaluation – giving a critical appraisal of technique, structure, the vision of the artist, the significance of the work, etc.

(Council of Europe, 2020: 106).

Even a cursory reading of the above four points reveals unmistakeable links to critical thinking principles, particular the last point which deals with an examination of the type of technique used, the organisation of the same, the overall image in the mind of the artist and the broader meaning of the work in question. It is to be expected that the depth and quality of the application of the four points by students will be heavily conditioned by their command of the language since A1 users will engage in relatively superficial reflection in contrast to C1 users who are much more likely to produce much more detailed and well-reasoned reflections on the selected text(s).

Looking again at the four points, we find that a distilled exposition of the point involving students expressing a personal response to selected creative texts would include:

- a) Explaining what they liked, what interested them about the work;
- b) Describing characters, saying which they identified with;
- c) Relating aspects of the work to their own experience;
- d) Relating feelings and emotions;
- e) Personal interpretation of the work as a whole or of aspects of it

The examination of the learners' everyday reality is thus brought into personal focus by following the steps outlined above so as to allow them to reflect on their own lived experience. In this way the green shoots of empathy can be nurtured to become fully-developed competencies that embrace the principles of understanding and tolerance.

For more advanced learners nearer to the C1 competency level, having had such instruction is beneficial as prepares them to actively engage with texts rather than be passive consumers of information in a way that treats reading as a dialogue. Such an approach gradually equips and encourages students to create meaning rather than simply receive it (Wilson, 2016: 258).

Training critically engaged citizens

A demanding and unpredictable contemporary world requires constant reflection and critical engagement on the part of policymakers and educators to prepare society for future challenges. In this respect, frequent reformulation of ideas is demand. In that respect, a document titled 'REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE REFERENCE FRAMEWORK OF COMPETENCES FOR DEMOCRATIC CULTURE (RFCDC) 2023' was published in December 2024. I will refer to this document hereinafter as the RFCDC and it was written to '...address current political and social issues and future challenges...' (Council of Europe, 2024: 48).

The review also called for the Competences for Democratic Culture would take account of what is referred to as 'past and current social and political issues and challenges such as migration, human rights, digitalisation and artificial intelligence, social inequalities and environmental issues' (Council of Europe, 2024: 48).

In what I would argue is one of its most striking recommendations, the Review recognise the fundamental role of critical thinking when it asserts the necessity to.

Place a strong emphasis on developing analytical and critical thinking and problem-solving skills to prepare learners for confronting the complexities and uncertainties of contemporary European and global society, including the ones related to environmental education and sustainability'

(Council of Europe, 2024: 48)

Once more, we are confronted with the unavoidable need to teach analytical and critical thinking to both mature citizens, but also the current school-going population who will become the citizens of the future. The timely reminder to also take account of environmental education is an important focus of attention in an era increasingly marked by the strong effects of climate change and environmental deterioration.

Any initiative that seeks to educate about the future must inevitably deal with educating the youth of today who shall become the critically-aware citizens of tomorrow and thus the decision-makers of the future. To do this, we must try to understand how students picture the future and think about how it might be. In their instructive book, *Youth futures: comparative research and transformative visions*, Gidley and Inayatullah (2002) stress the need to go beyond the temptation to merely identify what young people think the future will be like, whether at local or at global level, but this is of no real value in isolation. They stress the necessity to incorporate young people's views on what concerns them in terms of what is happening in the world around them and what hopes they may have to change those things in the

future (Gidley and Inayatullah, 2002: 507). In research carried out in the late 1996 and 2006 it was discovered that there were five dimensions to the learning of students engaged in exploring future issues. These are:

1. *Cognitive dimension*—learning new facts and information about the current global situation, traditionally considered to be the core of teaching about global issues. Some students felt cognitively overwhelmed by what they learnt about environmental and other issues.
2. *Affective dimension*—some students experienced a wave of conflicting emotions when considering the impact of global issues on the future. These emotions ranged from excitement and hopefulness to depression and despair.
3. *Existential dimension*—for some being confronted with issues of sustainability or climate change can lead to deep soul searching about their values, life-purpose and ways of living.
4. *Empowerment dimension*—if students can work through these previous stages they begin to feel a sense of agency and empowerment arising from a clearer sense of personal and (with older groups) professional direction. In particular this arises through envisioning positive scenarios for particular futures and the steps needed for their realisation.
5. *Action dimension*—if the questions raised by the first four stages of learning can be satisfactorily resolved then informed personal, social and political choices and action are much more likely to follow. (Gidley and Inayatullah, 2002: 507-08).

These five dimensions provide a useful set of principles to examine how greater consideration can be given to make pedagogical strategies more innovative and engaging. However, as educators we must also be honest with ourselves so that we can recognise that a strong degree of denial persists in society about the scale and extent of the environmental problems linked to climate change. In more recent years, a realisation has finally been reached whereby the future can no longer be allowed to simply 'take care of itself'. The arrival at such a paradigm shift has also led to the acknowledgement that short-term thinking has long been a default norm in Western societies and since this habit is gradually breaking down in some segments of society, we have learned that we must make provision for the future using new ideas (Slaughter, 2004: 182). In this respect, we can once again resort to the power of storytelling to provide and stimulate alternative perspectives in the minds of the citizens of the future and their teachers and this is a point I will return to later.

Frustrated systems of perception: ways forward?

Overcoming difficulties in terms of clear perception of challenges requires an honest assessment of existing

challenges. A strong perceptual impulse in this respect can be found in the work of Richard Slaughter in his book *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight* in which he identifies a practice responsible for frustrating the process of true perception of reality which he calls 'bounded rationality' (Slaughter, 2004: 183). Slaughter's diagnosis of this situation informs us that:

It is normal for those working in organizations to focus their attention strongly within the organization and to ignore much of significance that lies outside. This inward-looking focus encourages a kind of systematic blindness to 'signals of change' that arise in the external environment. Wider systemic relationships and processes on which the organization depends are constantly overlooked. While it is true that everyone needs perceptual 'filters' to reduce the quantity of information they can deal with, the question of quality remains central. It follows that the selection and use of such 'filters' needs to be both conscious and strategic. Bounded rationality means that this seldom happens.

(Slaughter, 2004: 183)

Slaughter's incisive mapping of this myopic and closed-loop thinking provides further evidence of the need to employ pedagogical methods that encourage the acquisition of critical thinking strategies so as to expose these flaws in our thinking. Once identified, these shortcomings can be remedied with goodwill and hard-work. The key instrument in this endeavour identified in this lecture is of course storytelling. I wish to return to that domain and retrieve some useful insights from the work of the late American science-fiction writer and essayist, Ray Bradbury.

In a collection titled *Bradbury Speaks: Too Soon from the Cave, Too Far from the Stairs* by Ray Bradbury originally published in 2005 by Harper Collins, Bradbury offers some insightful remarks. In an essay from this collection called 'Predicting the Past, Remembering the Future' (2001), Bradbury observes the vast challenges we face, but also the great progress made to date where he says:

"Of what is past, or passing, or to come."

That says it all.

The last line of William Butler Yeats's hypnotic poem "Sailing to Byzantium."

It describes the entire history of mankind on Earth.

It tells the whole history of science fiction in a few incredible words.

For history and science fiction are inseparable.

Poppycock?

No, humanity's truth.

For all that human beings have ever thought about is the future.

Hiding in caves, discovering fire, building cities—all of these were science-fictional endeavors. We can see the depiction of possible futures scrawled on cave walls in southern France, where the first science-fiction tales illustrated how to find, kill, and eat the wild beasts.

The problems that faced primitive man had to be solved. They dreamed answers to dire questions; that is the essence of the fiction that becomes science. Once a vivid dream was realized in their heads, they were able to act on it. So the creatures of old time planned for tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. What is true of them certainly is true of us. We wonder about tomorrow morning, tomorrow evening, and the day after that, so as to plan our schools, marriages, and careers. Everything that we do has to be imagined first.
(Bradbury, 2005: 33)

Indeed, Bradbury's powerful imagination also led him to write the following in *Earthrise and its Faces* (1999):

What a shame our new generations were born in the wrong year. They missed the great revelations. They arrived when the curtains had already risen on the miraculous, and so could not gasp with love at the newfound land of Earth.

I speak, of course, of that night when billions of TV viewers first glimpsed our bluewhite world in *Earthrise*, a remembrance of old time, a promiser of futures.

It was, to many of us, the great face of Creation thrust near to enchant us to tears. It was love at first sight.

But then the second sights came. Peering closer at the wondrous blue sphere in space, we said, "Where have I seen that face before?"

The answer was: Never.

Until our time, cartographers fumbled their hands over terrains arctic and equatorial and made Braille transcriptions to steer sailors of seas and clouds.

The whole of the Earth was a crinkled maze awaiting the rough guess of sea captains, pathfinders, and

nomad tillers of soil. From these palsied reckonings, windblown prints sprang, hoping

for safe passage but risking death. Airplanes did the first new chartings, jets sharpened

the perception, but it was the shuttle that lassoed the globe to tapestry darkrooms with manifested dreams.

At twenty-five thousand miles per hour, those bullets unraveled photo lightning flashes that drowned in chemistries, rose as revelations.

And there were the faces.

A few and then ten dozen mysterious looks. Great continental bodies, vast oceans,

and then sharp focusings at this old wrinkled world hid under our spacecraft until in camera.

At long last see all of Earth suspended, they said. Then find its grimaces, up close as

the plains, hills, and mountains show how they came to scowl or break forth plains calm

of sand and dunes that, wind-washed, erased old looks for new. (...)

(Bradbury, 2005: 43)

Bradbury strongly encourages us to be sceptical about the doomsayers and dream-makers alike, but where have we heard that idea before? Oh yes, *critical thinking*!

Critical thinking on its own, of course, is not enough. So what about the stories and their tellers? Fortunately for us great writers like Ray Bradbury have gifted the world with many wonderful tales. Before I conclude my remarks I wish to mention at least one of them. In perhaps one of the most famous dystopian works for fiction of the 20th century, *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury warns against the dangers of censorship and the imposition of an official narrative in one segment near the end of the book where one character says:

Speed up the film, Montag, quick. Click? Pic? Look, Eye, Now, Flick, Here, Three, Swift, Pace, Up, Down, In Out, Why, How, Who, What, Where, Eh? Uh? Bang! Smack! Wallop, Bing, Bong, Boom! Digest-digests, digest-digests-digests. Politics. One column, two sentences, a headline! Then, in mid-air, all vanishes. Whirl man's mind around so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters, that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought!" (F 73)

A further interaction attests to the issue of an approved official narrative where:

We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all

are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cover, to judge themselves against. So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it! Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man's mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man? Me? I won't stomach them for a minute . . . (F 77)

An updated film-version of *Fahrenheit 451* was made by HBO in 2018 for those of you interested in seeing it. I would, however, strongly recommend you read the book beforehand.

CONCLUSION

As I mentioned at the beginning, the acquisition of critical thinking skills and storytelling go hand in hand. Critical reflection needs a context and context needs characters and events to give it form and life-force. We can find a plentiful supply of such forms of life in fiction, but do we have the optimism and energy to show our students the way forward? I choose to believe that the answer to those two questions is a resounding yes.

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