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Recovering the Claim of the Story

Gordon M. Pradl

In recent years I have found myself spouting the claim that stories, whether spoken or written, are central to our linguistic development. Yet if those supporting genre theory are correct, it now appears that my position may have negative consequences: it aligns me with the 'pro-narrative' forces in education who are supposed to be unwittingly depriving children of certain important avenues of linguistic development. Of course this is a moot point, for where is the evidence that what little writing is going on in schools concentrates primarily on the telling of stories? Actual conditions aside, however, it is time to recognize that numerous educational opportunities are being squandered because of an impoverished conception of what stories are and what they accomplish in human terms. In this essay, through an exploration of how arguments are lodged in stories, I want to demonstrate that narrative and exposition do not function independently of each other.

The difficulty here, as I understand it, involves the shifting associations called up by the categories employed to discriminate the social functions of language. We use language in innumerable ways, from ordering fast food to proposing to a future spouse, and in each instance we have the possibility of completing each act either with a sense of flair or perfunctorily. Thus it is appropriate to speak of the art characteristics of each and every linguistic act — the range of variability in the stylishness of the performance. Such a dimension, however, is usually not uppermost in our minds when we judge the success of some particular transactional use of language. In such genres we are generally more concerned with accuracy and results.
Yet when we consider 'narrative' as an instrumental language category, we're often compelled to reverse our assessment procedure because we have difficulty distinguishing adequately between a story's aesthetic or art characteristics and its social or functional characteristics. With each story, we can vary our focal attention: in some, our focus will be on the various linguistic and structural features that determine the form and style of the presentation (a turning of the text inward on itself); in others, our attention will centre on matters of reference and understanding, including validity or verisimilitude (a turning of the text outward to a variety of referent points in the arena of life itself, regardless of whether that life is realized in fictional or non-fictional terms, a distinction increasingly under attack these days). Shouldeither focus be granted prioritying over the place and function of stories, either in education or in moral development? Unfortunately, it is difficult not to split one's loyalties on this issue. Many language arts teachers, for example, tend to view stories—at least in the domain of the classroom—as self-contained entities, isolated from real-world contingencies. Their interest in the story, in other words, seems to be mainly aesthetic; the reader (or writer) is supposed to be concentrating on purely formal relationships as the key tools for meaning making. Yet in contrast to this school focus, stories told in the real world are generally judged in terms of how effectively they represent and evaluate human motives and deeds. Accordingly, outside of school we oftenseethat stories are our primary way of entering and probing the world of action in order to 'construct' some understanding that best suits our particular needs and objectives—either challenging or consolidating the roles comprising our identity—and in this way prepare for future encounters. The shape of tomorrow grows inevitably out of our narrative depiction of yesterday. When, for example, a casual acquaintance appears to avoid us during some public occasion, our subsequent meetings will vary greatly depending upon whether we embedded his actions in a story about shyness or as a story about snobbery. Of course as our needs and objectives change, our rendering of an event (directed by our concealing or self-promoting commentary) will also change. Yet when we do so, our profound commiseration will also be directed by our conceit of self-promotion, information, or our own particular kinds of confusion. The story is also a vehicle for our own knowing. Interestingly, in this way the process of composing the story and the story composing of others—especially in a classroom setting—may be considered by some to be the most important linkages between narrative and exposition. Yet despite the analytical qualms of narrative and its limitations, as one scholar has noted, 'the story is the result of a narrative sensibility, in part because we cannot afford to write out those things we cannot afford to forget.' Still, even as we consider the various individual and social aims possible in real life and memory, hope and desire, are left with what we consider to be our experience. What stories make are left with what we consider to be our experience. What stories make highlighting and analysing the key elements of an event through
In pursuing the nature of this linkage I have found it instructive to consider Tom Newkirk's attempt to classify 130 samples of his daughter's writing. In most instances, as Newkirk suggests, our use of language is directly related to the distribution of power in the world, power over ourselves, power over others. Therefore it was not unusual to find, as he did, many examples of what he labelled 'conative discourse'—that is, language that persuades and regulates. In this case, Newkirk found his five-year-old daughter Sarah using 'conative course' to negotiate and assert rights, to make requests, and to role-play authority figures (p. 342).

What interests me here is how one develops an interpretive frame for categorizing and understanding Sarah's use of language. Take, for instance, Newkirk's first example, 'Asserting Rights':

One evening I returned from a week-long trip to find a note from Sarah tacked to the front door:

Gouptomyroomandseemeandbringthepresent.

Sarah knew that I brought presents after trips; it was her right to get them, and she wasn't going to wait. Because she was asserting a right, she didn't have to ask me to come up, she could tell me (p. 342).

We have been trained more than well in the use of various pragmatic linguistic analyses, such as speech act theory, to immediately recognize this utterance as constituting an apology. And in this case, as Newkirk observes, these particularities add style to culture and discourse. Indeed, these particularities can be realized only in immediate circumstances; it is as if the circumstances are socially constituted, and while the instances are expressed by instances that are socially constituted, it is as if the circumstances in which the instances are expressed are socially constituted. Indeed, in this instance we might wonder if Sarah's request, 'don't be mad, I love you', could tell me (p. 342).
When Newkirk speaks of 'the kind of opposition that Newkirk claims need sorting out,' it is instructive to reflect on the kind of opposition that Newkirk identifies within his own framework. The purpose of Newkirk’s exposition of his great divide is explicitly revealed when his claims language instruction in the schools.

The opposition to which Newkirk refers is not merely a distinction between reading and writing, or even between reading and listening or speaking. It is a distinction between the use of language as a means of transmitting information and as a means of persuading others to act. This distinction is central to Newkirk’s argument, and it is the basis for his claim that the schools are failing to teach students how to think critically.

Newkirk’s position is that the schools are focused too heavily on imparting knowledge and not enough on teaching students how to evaluate that knowledge. He argues that this is a problem because it leads to students who are able to regurgitate information but who are unable to think independently. This, in turn, leads to a society that is able to accept whatever is presented to it without question.

Newkirk’s argument is based on his belief that the schools are failing to teach students how to think critically. He argues that this is a problem because it leads to students who are able to regurgitate information but who are unable to think independently. This, in turn, leads to a society that is able to accept whatever is presented to it without question.

If Newkirk’s argument is correct, then it is clear that the schools need to be reformed. But it is also clear that the schools are not the only place where critical thinking is possible. As Newkirk himself points out, critical thinking can be taught in a variety of contexts, including the home, the workplace, and the community.

In conclusion, Newkirk’s argument is a powerful one. It is clear that the schools are failing to teach students how to think critically. But it is also clear that the schools are not the only place where critical thinking is possible. As Newkirk himself points out, critical thinking can be taught in a variety of contexts, including the home, the workplace, and the community.
does—between persuasion and story—is to see stories as hermetically sealed, free of social context. Yet perhaps Newkirk has touched on a truth to the extent that the social potential of stories is often being wasted in particular classrooms: when teachers allow stories to float freely, without considering the arguments being contested about power relations among people, they do so in opposition to the actual dynamics of stories. A major purpose behind any story is persuasion, and it is persuasion that binds people together. Most directly this act of persuasion involves the logic of the story as an argument, and this question can turn into an argument as we go on to see stories as not only as narratives, but also as arguments.

Sorather than separate 'persuasive writing' from narrative, I would argue that the author of a narrative is also seeking to convince, and, if necessary, to change the reader's mind. Quite simply, what argument ever existed free of the contingencies of some human drama?

Thus we had better pay close attention to Newkirk's limiting notion about what is involved in stories and the telling of stories. In trying to see beyond a rather bland and uncritical use of stories in the classroom, he has introduced an issue that is of great interest: In trying to see stories as emanating from the contrast of social contexts, he has referred to the social potential of stories as being utilized in a particular context: when teachers allow stories to float freely, without considering the arguments being contested about power relations among people, they do so in opposition to the actual dynamics of stories. A major purpose behind any story is persuasion, and it is persuasion that binds people together. Most directly this act of persuasion involves the logic of the story as an argument, and this question can turn into an argument as we go on to see stories as not only as narratives, but also as arguments.

The context under which the various arguments are made about the world, while we may realize the importance of seeing in touch with the story, while we may realize the importance of seeing the world, the tale story is brought into service, precisely remains impossible.

Although a story is also obviously different from an argument, it may

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itis instructive to note that when we separate linguistic acts from their emotional and social content, we protect ourselves from the ambiguities and conflicting interpretations to which our human motives and actions are subject; the benefits of this dissociation manoeuvre are not lost on teachers. Accordingly, many of us in the classroom prosper by segregating the world of power relations from the immediate lesson at hand. It is understandably difficult to pry teachers loose from the security of their varying taxonomies and pigeonholes precisely because of their fear that all kinds of chaos and disorder will immediately unleash an anarchy of the intellect, with the result that their foundations of their hegemony might be exposed. By keeping the lesson, whether it be storytelling time or workbook exercises in sentence combining, free of context, we are able to avoid the vagaries and indeterminacies of interpretation. And even when we supposed to celebrate the individual creative abilities of students by emphasizing their 'authorship' and their 'voice', we fail to relate 'creativity' to 'criticism'. Thus, the social dimensions and implications of produced 'texts' don't receive their due in the classroom, and very little consciousness gets transformed or matured.

Newkirk's suggestions for 'non-narrative' language activities (p. 347) provide an occasion for demonstrating how various arguments that may occur in the classroom can in fact be embedded in some teaching-learning strategies to uncover and explore the tacit stories that outline the continuing of particular human responses to given events. To illustrate, let's choose the child's assertion that 'Math is boring.' To make sense of this argument, we will need some other evidence, such as: 'I don't understand it'; 'I have trouble making my numbers'; 'It's too hard'; 'I can't think of anything'; 'I hate numbers.'

In this instance, to extend the original proposition into an argument is literally to ask what the word 'boring' means and what this has to do with mathematics. For nothing is inherently boring but that we make it so. Thus to manage an argument is really to expose the debts of this unfaithful proposition. It is like the truth that cannot be the facts. You know that they are true, but they are always wrong. You tell children how things work; you tell them that life is a nice business; you tell them that the world is a geometric piece of expression, with a range of potential responses to it. A story, indeed, any text, is derived from the telling of the human deeds and moods - opinions. Of course the real form of the one's belief system about how the world - especially the world of
of industrial capitalism, it is the corporate-financial elite that most clearly exhibits the supposed defects of the poor: present-time orientation and the incapacity to defer gratification. It is in the telling of the story—an interpretive act itself—thata kind of assertion takes place.

The oft-repeated story told by children to their parents—'We had math in school today, but nothing happened'—begins to open up possibilities of what lies behind the earlier 'argument-starter,' Math is boring. Why is it boring? Because nothing ever happens. Fine, we respond, but what is being exposed here? And what needs further uncovering? In this instance, a child's hidden system of expectations and values will need uncovering—at a tricky proposition indeed. What does the child think is supposed to happen in math class? Or contrastingly, what are examples of something that is seen to be happening? Answers to such questions would provide a more precise picture of the roles and reification claims embedded in the discourse of the world. Perhaps the child is actually saying, implicit in the events told, 'You see, I'm not being taken seriously and you need to address something about that,' and it is the complaint that is the event being complained about, not the state of affairs, real or imagined, that contrasts with the event being complained about, or the complainer would be unable to recognize his complaint. But oh don't bother me! responds the bored child. And so we rest for another day.

Or take the briefest of stories, one that appears in Gunther Kress's Learning to Write:

On Saturday my dog got run over and the driver did not stop.

What are the arguments here? Apparently all we have from this seven-year-old writer are the plain facts. No emotion or condensation, no sermon or depression. Thin stuff, typical of a minimal burst of early writing. But its retelling raises issues about behavior and responsibility in the world. And there is much to explore here about narrative and rhetoric within this genre. What can we say about the world and about the world of the text, about blame and deviance, and about how we feel when these things happen? Where's the fairness in it all? So the story begins as a kind of primitive claim and investigation about power (and chance and necessity), as Newkirk suggested, and in this instance, as an attack on the contingency of things. Rather, we must take this as an attack on the contingency of stories. When the genre produces insist, what is needed then is a model that sets relationships inevitably depend on stories.
Notes


5 ‘Anyone for Tennis?’ in Reid, ed., The Place of Genre in Learning, p.113.


7 Labov remains the key commentator in this area, especially with his ‘evaluation’ category, whereby part of the narrative can be viewed as reflection and interpretation — a kind of topic underliner or sentence. See ‘The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax,’ in Language in the Inner City, Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 1972.


11 These last two claims come from Barbara Ehrenreich’s Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class, New York, Pantheon Books, 1989, p. 255, and might serve as an appropriate point implicitly being made in some story about the latest scandal in Washington or on Wall Street.


13 Actually, in Labov’s terms, we might view the conjuctions as markers pointing to the evaluative elements: each and raises some causal or evaluative question, opens up some interpretive gap.

14 Of course the mere fact that we can invent a seemingly endless commentary on any story, no matter how short, does not mean that we blurt it out in the presence of the child. Withholding interpretation can be as much of an art as interpreting. See my ‘Learning How to Begin and End a Story,’ Language Arts 56 (1979), 21-25.


16 Along these lines Anne Freudman’s ‘Anyone for Tennis?’ (n. 5 above) is most instructive in keeping us away from any reductionist genre taxonomy.

17 Such a position is further extended, for instance, by Joseph Featherstone’s proposal that storytelling gets at truths beyond conventional ‘objective’ scholarship in the social sciences. ‘The text [of the story] itself enacts the writer’s deepest moral and political values, the eclecticism of method and material. What if this kind of work were to become more prevalent? What are the implications
of a kind of scholarship in education that combines the distancing power of analysis with another kind of power — the deep gesture of solidarity that Balm in Gilead [the biography Featherstone is reviewing] represents? Surely analysis and solidarity could stand as two poles of scholarship. Much research has neglected the second, studying teachers, for example, as though they were fruit flies. I like to think that Lightfoot might be working in a buried tradition of American scholarly writing whose founders I've already invoked in the course of this essay — W.E.B. DuBois and William James' ('To Make the Spirit Whole,' Harvard Educational Review 59, [1989], p. 376.)

IAN REID: Gayatri has asked me to sketch out first some general issues raised by the current study of narrative. She will respond as the spirit moves her, after which the session will be open for questions and comments.

Large claims have been made for narrative as a thoroughly pervasive element in culture and in discourse about culture. This appears to hold true at three levels. First, it's a commonplace that narrative occurs ubiquitously across the range of social interchanges by which we come to know ourselves, one another, and the situations in which we find ourselves embedded. Narrative surrounds us everywhere, so the story goes; it circulates in the informal registers of gossip and joke, in the more formal ones of legal testimony and liturgical ritual, and in a vast array of other forms from song to soap, from myth to epitaph.

The second thing said very commonly (and perhaps too glibly) about narrative is that it's not a way of representing things already existing out there in the real world, but rather it actually constitutes them for us, giving primary shape to what we experience as reality. We inhabit not just a world where stories circulate, but a world whose perceived contours derive from narrative. It's even said, for instance by Fredric Jameson, that narrative is 'a primary mode of cognition'. What might exemplify that?