

What does storyline do for teachers?
Presentation Nov. 7th 2000, Björg Eiríksdóttir

I would like to discuss with you today

Why we are teachers

What it gives us to be teachers?

And how Storyline can both make us better teachers and give us fulfilment from being teachers.

You all know that being a teacher can be very tiring and exhausting and even though you use Storyline you will still be exhausted and tired and look very much forward to the Christmas holidays. Storyline helps you to feel that you have accomplished something and this method does the same for your students. At the same time all of you were interested and therefore having a good time so you will start the Christmas holidays with a good feeling.

It is the experience of myself and my colleagues in my school (Kársnesskóli in Kópavogur, Iceland) and other teachers that I have worked with, that I build my ideas on, concerning what Storyline does for teachers.

Before I start I will ask you to write down on a piece of paper your answer to the question; what does Storyline do for teachers? We will discuss the answers at the end of my presentation.

When we use Storyline we start by finding out what our pupils know by asking them questions, which we call key questions. Key questions are open questions as you know and the pupil's answers tell us what the pupils know and from this start the teacher knows what to teach and possibly the pupils answers give ideas how to teach within the principles of the Storyline method.

This knowledge makes the teacher more efficient, because he can evaluate what is important for the pupils to spend their time on.

Storyline has a good structure, but it is also flexible. The structure, the Storyline outline, tells us what we are going to do. It is not tied down to a lesson book. Therefore we have to think more of what we want to teach, where to find good references or how is an effective way to teach this or that.

Storyline has a beginning and a definite end. The chapter we are working on today is connected with the one we were working on yesterday and the one tomorrow. In the structure there is a balance in activities and arrangements. The children do not see the plan, but they learn to feel the structure and they even sometimes suggest a next chapter and it is in fact often the next chapter in the plan.

This structure, the Storyline outline, is very effective for the teacher and teachers groups. It is easy to plan a few weeks in advance both what material we need and how long a time it will take.

Due to the definite end of a Storyline topic, often a parent's night, the last bit of the work is often very exciting, because we are preparing for an event and a lot of work is done in a short time. We have to finish for a certain day.

To finish something is a very good feeling both for teachers and students.

This also gives opportunities for evaluation or assessment for teachers and students.

I have had my pupils evaluate the topics we have worked on and it is both very interesting and a lot of fun to read.

Often I have had the pupils make a short test in the end of a topic and I do it by asking. What do you think that everyone in the class should know now after working with this topic?

This is like a test result for the teacher and tells him if the students have acquired the main knowledge of what was intended with the topic.

I find it surprising and pleasant to learn how clever children are to sort out the main things.

As a teacher I always found it difficult and boring to recall the curriculum we had just finished to learn before exams. Now when we are preparing for the parent's evenings we start by finding out what the pupils think is important to tell their parents from the topic. Then we divide the suggestions between the students so they can prepare, next is to practice and then everyone listens and then the final point, the parents evening. By then everyone has listened to the whole program about three times. The next day is a very good day for an exam and that is what I do and I use mostly the suggestions from the pupils about the main points. The test is only a part of the assessment of the topic. I also assess how they work and how co-operative they are in groups and then all the written or oral presentations, reports and posters.

Afterwards the teacher has to think what have I taught or covered of the curriculum and what skills have the pupils acquired. What skills do the pupils have to practice more and how can I do it in a different way so it does not become boring?

When you are tied down to a textbook it is so easy to go to the next page and continue to practice the same thing as yesterday even though the students have already mastered the skill you were teaching, for the moment at least.

It is hard for many teachers to skip pages in a textbook. We were always taught to finish our work.

What we are not always aware of is that when the pupils are bored they learn very little so it is almost a waste of time to do one more practice page in a book if the pupils are not interested.

In a Newsweek article from 1996 I read after the Tim's study, that was at least famous in Iceland, because we scored below average both in math and science, many interesting aspects are discussed. In the article the author is comparing the scores of American children to their pairs in Japan and Singapore in math and science, and says:

"The study found that even though American teachers spend more time covering more material, they tend to emphasise rote memorisation while Singaporean and Japanese teachers encourage thoughtful problem solving."

In another place in this article the author talks about that quantity of time spent in many categories, and how it was not quality time.

The American pupils spent more time in math and science than the Japanese and the Singaporeans, but the time was not necessary quality time. I think this is also often the case in Iceland and many other countries. As we all know quantity and quality is not the same. The author also says that from this study one of the main results is that a good teacher seem to be the key to good scores. My understanding is that a good teacher uses effective teaching methods.

One of the principles of the Storyline method is to find out what the pupils know by asking key questions. By asking key questions, open questions, the pupils have to think!

Think how they think something is

How it could work and

What it is likely to look like.

After we have had the pupils to use their mind to think, recall and imagine we lead them to see the real thing and then they can compare and also e.g. state a reason for why they think their solution is as good or even better than the real thing.

I think that by using the Storyline method we become better teachers because we encourage our pupils to solve problems.

I am going to give you examples.

When I was doing a topic with my class about the new settlers in Iceland in the tenth century the class was thinking of how the settlers got food on the Viking ships on the way to Iceland. The

pupils found out that they could take some food with them, but it was difficult to take enough for reasons like:

- There were no freezers on board
- The ships were not big and they had to take a lot of other cargo
- Old food is not very good
- And the settlers did not know how long it would take to sail all

the way to Iceland

So the pupils decided that the settlers could fish on the way and even hunt a few birds that would rest on the ship. They would then cook the catch on board. Then we read in a book that the Vikings never have fire on board so how could they cook?

The pupils felt that their solution was better than the Vikings. We know now that some new research indicate that the Vikings may have had fire on board.

Here we had the pupils to solve a problem and often they come up with an excellent solution.

This gives us teachers a good feeling and also we are often surprised how clever the pupils are and how skilled we are to help them solve a problem so effectively.

The pupils make their conceptual model first before they meet the real thing.

The principle of Storyline to have the pupils make their conceptual model first before we show them the real thing is the one principle that gave me the most thought in the beginning and the one that makes Storyline different from other teaching methods. I think this is so effective and the children are often so pleased when they realise that their model is right or even better than the real thing. I often have found that it works and I am always so pleased.

I will give you examples!

A few years ago I was working with my class on a topic about the Promised Land in the Old Testament. We learned about Moses, the plagues and how difficult it was to go all this way over the desert and remember their God all the time. When we finished the topic the Spielberg movie "Prince of Egypt" was on in a cinema in Reykjavík. I managed to have a special show in the cinema for the classes in Kársnesskóli that were working on this topic. Everything went well. The interesting thing was their remarks after having seen the movie.

They said that the director had missed this and that when he made the movie, things they knew from their study that had happened. It was funny to hear how they were like shocked and full of moralisation and so aware of that they knew better. When they were looking at the movie they were checking their knowledge. That is of course what we want.

Another example from longer ago. I was finding out about the traffic signs with a 7 years old class by asking them what they thought they looked like. Many days after that the pupils were coming to me in school saying:

"Yesterday when I drove with my mother I saw a sign that" . . . "When I was walking home from school I saw a sign" . . . , and so on, even many weeks later occasionally the pupils came with remarks like these.

In the beginning I found it a little difficult to realise how this works so I have to tell you the first time this was proven to me.

When I was in Glasgow I had my daughters and friends do a Storyline topic on my living room wall. They were making a street and needed parking sign for those who are in a wheelchair.

My daughter asked me how the sign is. I knew it, but remembered to ask first.

What do you think it is like?

What is needed? Then she made a sign, which I believe everyone would have understood.

You can imagine what my daughter was looking for next time when we walked down town.

It is so fantastic to hear and find out that our pupils are learning so much and so aware of their knowledge.

To be able to teach the children to write, talk and listen are amongst the aims of all schools. But how do we teach that or have our pupils practise those skills?

To be able to write e.g. personal writing and functional writing you have to practise many, many times. To do the same thing over and over again is usually boring.

When I think back to before I started to use Storyline one of the things I noticed in my first year as a teacher were these questions from pupils:

How long does the writing have to be?

I don't know what to write about?

Or a pupil coming to me with two lines and says: I am finished!

This was because the pupils were not involved in what they were writing about. We could then say that the teacher had not prepared the writing well enough and that can be right. But we all know that it can be difficult when e.g. the textbook says that you should write about an interesting event in your summer holiday, and now it is the middle of winter! To make the pupils interested and involved in such a task is hard and then you get questions like the ones I mentioned.

When we are working on Storyline topics the pupils are involved in the Storyline and the writing within the topic has a purpose and everyone knows what to write about and not many write two lines and decide they have finished the task. It is not only that they write longer pieces they also use richer and more complicated vocabulary. A research was done in Iceland in 1985 on the vocabulary of children's writing connected with Storyline work and the results were that they used more complicated vocabulary than usually. This is connected to the fact that they are involved and are familiar with the subject.

This makes life so much easier for the teacher and also he gets so much more interesting work to read and comment on and the pupils are more content, interested and therefore learn more.

The Storyline structure has it built in it to give an opportunity to practice the same skill over and over again in a different context and in different situations and I will give you some examples to show you different writing within a topic.

A haiku from Japan. An article about an accident near a bird cliff. An article in a newspaper.

I was talking to a colleague two weeks ago who is working on a topic about a sea cliff and seabirds. The pupils are 11 years old and in the topic they are supposed to write an imaginary diary for a seabird they have been studying. My colleague told me that he was both pleased and surprised how easy this was and they knew right away that they should write "I woke up in the morning" and so on. Writing, as they were the birds. The diaries were not all realistic, but they knew how to do it and the teacher did not need any or very little time to explain, because they had written diaries before in other topics for a new settler, a farm woman and a dinosaur and the pupils were involved in the topic.

I think it is very important to be involved and the more experience I get and the more I think about this aspect the more I am convinced of its importance. So if you are involved in a topic because you are working on it, then it is timesaving to have the pupils write within the topic.

You don't need any extra time to get them involved.

In my research for my master theses I tried to count how often the pupils wrote in one topic and it was quite often.

The topic about the new settlers with ten year old students.

Fifteen times the pupils wrote something.

This included:

- *Writing a report*

- *Writing a poem*
- *Writing a draft and then making a fair copy*
- *Writing a description*
- *Writing a summary*
- *Writing a conclusion of group discussion*

But how do we get them to listen effectively to each other's reports. The weakest link in thematic work is to have the children learn from their classmate's reports. I have tried to program them a little before. Have them listen so they will be able to ask questions and I have also started to have 10 years old children take notes.

This has worked well and they are proud to be like older students. I also emphasise the importance of talking clearly and loud and that it is not polite to disturb a person who has prepared for a report by not being quiet and they should listen carefully.

I see from my research of the new settlers topic that the;
Pupils practised 22 times their talking and listening skills.

This included

- *Taking part in discussions in a big and a small group*
- *Standing up and talking to others in a rather formal way*
- *Explaining what they were doing*
- *Supporting their actions or opinion with arguments*
- *Listening to others in a big group and a small group*

When I sit with my pupils listening to a report, a story or a poem well prepared I become so proud and it gives me a reason to continue, because I am seeing some results.

The first point to note is that what children learn in the classroom will depend to a large extent on what they already know.

Three well worn sayings about children's learning:

- Listen and you will learn.
- You learn by doing.
- Let's discuss it.

Talking to others is a very effective way of clarifying once thinking.

When we use Storyline the pupils are active and therefore often more creative and lively. When this is the case the pupils are glad and positive. When they are positive they get motivated and interested and then they learn.

This makes life easier for the teacher and it also makes him interested and he becomes a better teacher.

I have to tell you some examples.

One of the first topic outlines I wrote is about dinosaurs. I had seen pupils both in Scotland and in America work on topics about dinosaurs and I saw that this subject made the students interested so I thought why not in Iceland?

When I started to work on this topic with my seven-year-old pupils I knew very little about dinosaurs, but I got very interested when I started to read about them and work on the topic. I got so involved that my family knew also a lot about these big creatures. I am sure that some of my interest and enthusiasm affected my pupils and this topic was a great success and they did some very difficult tasks such as writing long dinosaurs stories when they had just started to read and write.

Also when we did a topic about Japan I got very interested and I found how my eyes and ears were open for everything about Japan. I mention these topics because I knew very little about the subject before so I could feel it myself how this work was exciting. This topic work gives opportunity for the teacher to become almost obsessed with a certain subject for some time and does not have to divide energy among many themes at the same time.

When I met my friend from Kársnesskóli the other day she was eager to tell me about the topic she was working on, The Seabird topic, because she new I like that topic very much and I can tell you she was involved and interested.

I think the main task of teachers today is to get their pupils interested and the Storyline method can help with that e.g. by making the teacher interested.

To be a part of a team working on a task is a good feeling.

When you work with Storyline the teacher is not lecturing. The task is to ask the right questions. Nothing works if the question does not create some ideas to work on. This gives ownership to both teacher and pupils.

The teacher can think; What a cleverly worded question, and the pupil; What a clever answer.

When the work begins the pupils and the teacher work together to find the answers in the way that the teacher leads the students forward with other questions about e.g. where they can find ideas and answers.

It is teamwork and that is a good feeling for the teacher and the pupils.

In more traditional teaching the teacher is often isolated in many ways.

"Traditional teaching"

<i>Teacher talking</i>	<i>TM</i>	<i>Pupils listening</i>	<i>TM</i>	<i>Pupils work</i>
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Storyline

<i>Teacher's questions</i>				
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<i>Pupil's answers</i>	<i>TM</i>	<i>Discussions</i>	<i>TM</i>	<i>Team work</i>
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One of the principles of Storyline is to work in groups of many sizes and work in various ways. This I find is fun for the teacher and at the same time that it is a challenge for him to be able to have his pupils work in such a variety of ways and not get stuck in the same way like textbook-workbook, which is a way I find is getting so overwhelming e.g. in Icelandic schools. A lot of teaching material like this is published and I think we teachers find it convenient, but is it interesting for the pupils to learn many subjects like this? I do not think so and then it becomes difficult to have the pupils work well. Let's go back to quantity and quality. Even though the pupils finish many workbooks, but are not very interested they are maybe not learning as much as we wanted and their time is not quality time.

It dawned on me one autumn that I could teach almost all subjects in this way, textbook-workbook, if I wanted. These subjects were Icelandic, geography, history, natural sciences and English and even more.

This gave me a lot of thought and the next thing that came into my mind was: Since when is this textbook-workbook method, The method? Has it been proven to be the most effective method? After all this discussion with myself and later my colleagues I was so glad that I knew the Storyline method and could use these good textbooks e.g. as reference books. I am not saying that this method is not useable, but definitely not always.

I said before that people become good teachers because they use effective methods and I still think so and Storyline is one of them.

When we use Storyline our pupils sometimes work alone or in groups of many sizes. I know that this is important and that every individual must be able to work alone and also with others. So this variety of group sizes and work methods that is built in the Storyline method will prepare our pupils well for work and further study.

For the teacher this variety is challenging, interesting and also a lot of fun.

Some teachers find it difficult to manage group work and give up.

I always say the teacher has to learn as his pupils and he gets better with practice.

I found some interesting remarks in my diary when I did my research for my master's theses and if I had given up then I would never have realised what a good method Storyline is for both teachers and pupils.

I have mostly talked about how our pupils and their performance effect us teachers, but we also like to be recognised by parents and colleagues.

Quite often a proud teacher comes to a break in the teacher's room with samples of good work from his pupils.

Sometimes even someone in the bigger world than the school recognises your work.

In the end of a parents evening many parents come and thank you and say how pleased they are with the work and that they wished that they had learned it like this when they were young.

We teachers need appraisal like our pupils.

Following are some results from questionnaires with parents from my master's thesis. The questions were:

What do you think about children learning about the settlement in Iceland in this way?

Of 18 parents, 10 were very positive, 5 were positive and 3 rather positive.

What attitude does your child have towards the topic work about the settlement in Iceland?

Of 18 parents, 13 said very good and 5 answered well.

These answers were of course great encouragement for the teacher.

Also when someone comes into your classroom and the walls are all covered with pupil's work you show it willingly, because you are proud of it and you know about your important part of it.

Our aim at school is that our pupils learn.

This can be said in many ways and with many words, but I choose this short sentence.

In Kársnesskóli my colleagues and I have often discussed that our pupils seem to remember the topics so well and they can tell you many years later about a topic we have worked on.

Two years ago I had my 11 years old pupils that I had worked with since they were seven to recall all the topics we had worked on.

They could recall them all, total of 14 topics, and tell us a little about them. Many of them had favourite topics and they could say why they were their favourite topic.

In the autumn we often start by recalling what we did last year to connect the curriculum of this winter to last years curriculum.

In this process the teachers have often been so pleased, because the children remember so well what we have worked on. It is difficult to compare this to how it was before we started to use Storyline, but we do agree that there is a noticeable difference now when we work this way from what it was before.

It is of course very rewarding to get this feedback and to find that we are making some progress with our students.

This is the reason most of us are teachers and Storyline can help us with that.

In the end I will try to draw together what I have been saying.

What does Storyline do for teachers?

- *We are more effective as teachers, because we start by finding out what our pupils know.*
- *Our classrooms look good, because of all this interesting work on the walls and this environment is encouraging.*
- *The topics have a definite beginning and an end. To finish something gives us a good feeling and makes us ready to start something new.*
- *Our pupils are involved and therefore do better work and it is timesaving. The teacher is proud and having a good time.*
- *Our pupils are involved and interested and therefore learn more and this gives the teacher the drive to continue his work with pleasure.*
- *The structure is good to work with and practical and also helps the teacher to remember all the principles and make the work variable.*
- *The work makes us interested and that helps us to make our pupils interested.*
- *This work gives opportunity for the teacher to be creative and that is one of the main reasons for that it is fun to be a teacher.*
- *Good response from pupil's parents and colleagues is good for our self-esteem.*

Answers from participants to the question asked in the beginning.

What does Storyline do for teachers?

- gives them a structure for planning
- encourages imagination – the teacher + the pupils
- enables holistic thinking and integration of subjects
- develops creativity
- lets them learn from and with students
- shows more of pupils thinking and feeling
- focus is on respect
- encourages "happy" learners
- allows them to participate in the learning process
- gives them energy, - makes them feel good
- provides authentic contexts for learning
- lets them discover "hidden" qualities in pupils
- gives engagement, joy, respect, authenticity
- meaningful learning gives enjoyable teaching
- makes them eager to go to work
- encourages Cupertino – pupils – teachers
- develops thinking and discussion of learning and teaching
- encourages evaluation ... of pupils + learning
- makes them more professional and creative!

References:

Andrew Pollard, Learning in primary schools.

Neville, Bennet and Elisabeth, Managing classroom groups.