

Stories

Rise of the grassroots virtuosos – The story of ‘Teacher Stories’



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We live our lives according to the stories we tell ourselves and the stories that others tell about us. – John Winslade and Gerald Monk (2006:2)

Oh, the Places You’ll Go! – Dr Seuss (1990)

All good things start with a good idea. *Correction:* all good things start with my wife’s good ideas. After the debate surrounding the ‘Teachers as Workers’ SIG application to IATEFL last year, my wife – Theresa Gorman – hit on this simple idea: *teachers writing their own stories*. We wanted to do something positive yet also advocate for grassroots teachers, especially low-paid teachers with poor working conditions. We hoped to produce a book of stories, stories from the grassroots that would engage our teaching community. And who doesn’t have a story to tell?

We also felt frustration at how teachers are sometimes addressed in the top-down discourse of mainstream ELT – we’re expected to be the ‘agents of change’ yet we’re also labelled ‘opponents of change’. We’re too conservative, yet too radical; we lead when we should follow; we’re the bane of administrators and pen-pushers. We just can’t win! Yet, to a large extent, our quiet everyday lives go unheard: we are *invisible*.

Also, in the different countries where I’ve taught, teachers have said: “I’d love to write a story!” Or they confess in whispers that they have a novel, poem, or play lying in a drawer, crouching quietly in the dark.

So *Teacher Stories* was born.

The ELT industry, creativity and wealth creation

The *Teacher Stories* website (teacher-stories.com) states: “As teachers, we are often defined by others and cast into roles that serve the agendas of politicians, profiteers and pundits. *Teacher Stories* is a space where we tell our own stories, an act which is important because we are human beings and we are creative”.

In my blog post *Schizophrenic ELT* (2015), I point out that ELT and its accompanying institutions are, to some extent, market-driven rather than profession-driven. And when the market can no longer provide a living wage, questions arise as to the nature of these institutions and market-driven reasoning. Because it is unclear on what basis ELT can claim immunity from political economy – as Medley (2009:12) writes, “Language instruction does not take place in a socio-political vacuum”.

Furthermore, as Block and Gray (2015:11) note, “What the sector [commercial ELT] requires is in fact a workforce capable of delivering a standardized product into the educational marketplace, capable of using basic tools of the trade such as textbooks ...”. Arguably, the teaching bodies and brains required by the commercial sector have little use for craft knowledge, pedagogical theories, and creativity.

But what is creativity? Human creativity forms new ideas, new ideas lead to technology, and new technology creates wealth. But what is *wealth*? We associate wealth with material things: commodities, money, possessions. However, sociologist John Holloway (2015), in his innovative analysis of the first sentence of Marx’s *Capital*, notes that Marx uses the German word *Reichtum*, which also means richness, or abundance. Therefore, in his formulation, wealth itself arises out of human creativity, or as Marx (1857/1973: 488) writes, “the absolute working-out of [humanity’s] creative potentialities”. (It is only in *appearance* that commodities and wealth are connected, not in reality).

For Holloway, wealth ‘is collective, it is social, the product of human interaction – the richness of what is often referred to as ‘the common’. Indeed, this is the sense we experience in the word *commonwealth*. Therefore, in opposition to the prevailing commercialism within ELT, with *Teacher Stories*, we decided at an early stage we would distribute the e-book for free¹. This was a project mining the hidden seams of creativity and wealth within working teachers, and bringing the results to the surface—precious, shining stones for everyone to see and enjoy—a *common wealth*.

A celebration—making visible

However, we weren’t motivated primarily by *critique* but rather by *celebration*. What remains delicious about teaching is the feeling that flows after closing the classroom door. The sudden peace in the room, that focussed narrowing to just you and the learners and the work to be done. We’re all of us performers, virtuosos, *grassroots*

virtuosos—and the classroom is our theatre. If the classroom isn’t a theatre, then why do so many funny, unusual, sad, moving experiences emerge from this strange table-, chair-, and chalkboard-containing box? Moreover, this theatre requires more than a box, this theatre needs an *audience*. Philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that:

performing artists – dancers, play-actors, musicians and the like – need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before who they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their ‘work,’ and both depend upon others for the performance itself. (1977: 154-155)

Yet perhaps in contrast to a theatrical performance or music concert, our work is inherently active: both learners and teachers attempt to reach somewhere as yet unexplored. This slow work of performing, explaining, and guiding learners to a new place; the drama of the classroom (and the drama outside the classroom); this is what matters—and we wanted a platform to express this. To make the lives of ordinary teachers *visible*.

The book itself

Once we’d set up the website and put out the call for submissions, we sat back and waited for stories to flood in. We waited—and they didn’t arrive. We only received around 15 submissions over a period of six months, when we were hoping for many more (and several of these 15 submissions we had to reject). Our original plan was to see which themes were most prominent and then divide the stories into thematic chapters e.g. *Journeys*, or *Classroom Experiences*. But with so few submissions, we had to focus on getting these submissions as sharp and reader-centred as we could, as there was no place for a ‘weaker’ story to hide. On the positive side, as a consequence we are unbelievably proud of the final stories in the collection and the hard work of

¹ The e-book is free, but we are selling the paper book (which we have just received) at conferences for cost price.

the authors involved: *Sabine Cayrou, Helen Waldron, Greg Bond, Mohammed Qaid, and Neil Scarth*. It's difficult to write a story that connects emotionally with the reader, but I think all our authors achieved this. We're also very grateful that our writers had the bravery to step forward and express how they felt about their teaching practice not only in print, but in narrative form. This definitely isn't easy, but they again succeeded. As Mary Anne Radmacher (2009) writes, "Courage doesn't always roar".

I also developed a new-found sympathy for editors! Editing is another invisible job, dotting all the 'i's, standardising errant formatting and completing all the fiddly jobs that need to be done before publication. It's a thankless task, and I often asked myself *Why am I doing this?* – in the middle of the night spent staring at a screen.



Teacher Stories – the finished product!

Nevertheless, we were very happy when the e-book finally came out – for free download – in December 2015 on *Smashwords* with the full title of *Teacher Stories: Stories from the Edges of Language Teaching*. I'll let you into a little secret, the book cover – the various 'edges' – contains photographs taken around our local neighbourhood Moabit, and in our two favourite cafes! (You can see my cup of cappuccino.) On publication, we received very supportive comments on social media, including this from *The Secret DoS* on Twitter: "Sometimes, at

Christmas, something CAN be too good to be true".

The book has been downloaded over 200 times, and we've had some great feedback from teachers, such as this comment from John Whipple: "It resonated with my feeling about ELT as work and sings the song of our sector. It is a hidden job. It is an accidental choice for many. It runs on the hopeful and the optimistic."

The stories themselves

There are six stories in total in the collection. As we write in the introduction, these stories "offer a glimpse of six different edges; edges where teachers – the bodies that dance across classrooms, performing the pedagogical rituals required of them – try to achieve some kind of balance and grace."

Sabine Cayrou's story, *Monday Morning Dizziness*, explores a feeling we all know: setting out to teach on a Monday morning, with mixed feelings:

Each time I am about to begin an intensive course, it is always the same. On the first day I look like a work animal, able to carry three or four burdens all at once. Somehow so overloaded but at the same time so empty.

Helen Waldron's story, *Light a Perfumed Candle*, touches on deeper themes – the sadness of being stuck in the same well-furrowed rut, while becoming aware of the whispers of mortality. The story centres on a paradox: the freelance English teacher – going into a company to give English classes – suffers the instability and precariousness of freelancing, but at the same time, represents freedom for the workers stuck inside the corporate grind:

"We have to go to the toilet to cry," said one of my young, (blonde, ravishingly beautiful) students.

Greg Bond's story, *The Chicken and the Egg*, involves a chicken and East Germany in the 80s, and if I tell you more I'll ruin the surprise – go read it! My story, *Make the Most of Your Days*, is a memoir of my relationship with Joe Morin, my 'mentor' whom I met in my first year of teaching

in Poland. The story tells of our relationship in a series of e-mail exchanges – which are all verbatim, written over several years. To lighten the mood, *Creative Leadership*, by Yemeni teacher Mohammed Qaid, is a humorous account of an idiosyncratic ELT boss, something we can all relate to:

I may give you a car, you can crash it, I can give you a computer, you may smash it. But I can't afford to give you students' minds to ruin them.

Finally, *Another Darkness* by Neil Scarth is a poignant recollection of one student, of one particular moment in the classroom, and the insight this moment sparked. I like Neil's story because he conveys the doubt and fragility that even experienced teachers feel, and this is conveyed the only way such complicated feelings can be: *obliquely*. And that's no small achievement.

What's next?

We'd love to be able to do *Teacher Stories 2: More Stories from the Edges of Language Teaching*, but at present myself and Theresa are snowed under with work and study. To self-publish such a collection takes massive amounts of time and dedication, and unfortunately, dedication doesn't pay the rent! So we'll see what the future brings. Naturally, if you have a burning story you'd like to share, or any comments on this project—feel free to get in touch via the *Teacher Stories* Facebook page or by email.

Conclusion

Overall, we're both ecstatic that this project journeyed from idea to reality, and that ordinary teachers gained a platform to tell their own stories. With any luck, this platform will inspire others to undertake similar projects, and help to build solidarity and empathy between grassroots teachers.

"A new world requires new stories," Simon Hodges wrote in a 2014 *Open Democracy* article, "but people will only listen to them when they themselves are included in the storyline". I would encourage you to read *Teacher Stories*, think about whether you have a story you'd like to tell,

if you'd like to join this ongoing storyline, and even if you'd like to make a new world. Because there's no limit to the places we could go.

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