

# Storytelling in the Social Studies Classroom

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## Abstract

*Many teachers tell stories. They take a story, whether their own or another's, and turn it into the experience of their students. This article showcases four stories from secondary social studies classrooms in Singapore that illustrated how teachers have used stories for various purposes. Stories were observed to be used to teach morals, inspire empathy and cultural understanding, engage students, and help them acquire thinking skills such as assessing the reliability of sources. Stories, when used effectively, can achieve multiple purposes, many of which are aligned with the kinds of citizenship qualities and skills we want to see developed in learners of all ages. Suggestions on how teachers can incorporate storytelling in their lessons are provided at the end of this paper. Even though the four stories are from the secondary level, the ideas and suggestions in this article can have application in primary social studies classrooms as well.*

## Introduction

Many teachers tell stories. They take a story, whether their own or another's, and turn it into the experience of their listeners (Benjamin, 1968). The story, which relates events that have happened, stands in contrast against other types of telling such as a description, exposition or argument, which are commonly associated with social studies education. Stories are pervasive and powerful. They communicate experiences and information in a manner that entices listeners and encourages responses. In fact, some

believe that storytelling is a pan-global phenomenon, unique to all cultures in the human race (White, 1980). It is not surprising that many teachers tell stories in their classrooms, for stories are profound experiences for learners of every level. Stories can be told spontaneously according to a teacher's gut feelings or in a planned manner such as a premeditated sharing of a story from the textbook. In this article, I will demonstrate how stories have been used by social studies teachers to achieve various citizenship aims and suggest that stories have an important place in the teacher's pedagogical toolbox.

When do teachers tell stories? For many teachers, the magic is in the moment. Many do not plan to tell stories, but tell them as the opportunity arises (see Jackson, 1995). Yet, for others, story materials are deliberately chosen and weaved into their lesson plans to achieve specific purposes (Egan, 1986). Why do teachers tell stories? Stories have a privileged status among the different types of information as they are easy to comprehend and remember, not only because people pay close attention to them, but also because of something inherent in the story structure that makes them so (Willingham, 2004). They are carriers of values and knowledge that can be put to use both in school and beyond (Hensel & Rasco, 1992). Lastly, stories are not only good for transmitting knowledge but they are also the knowledge we want students to have (Jackson, 1995). Knowing particular stories make us part of a community. Whether or not one agrees with it, it would be surprising for a Singaporean not to know "The Singapore

Story”, the tale of Singapore’s rapid transformation from third world to first under the governance of the People’s Action Party (PAP).

When teachers introduce stories into their lessons, what may be achieved are lessons that are “far richer in content and fuller of wisdom” than anything they had planned to achieve prior to the lesson (Jackson, 1995, p 22). One of the reasons why stories can deliver far more than they promise is because in stories, it is left to the listener to make the psychological connections between events and to interpret them personally. In other words, storytelling allows listeners to define their own meanings of events told to them. Thus, very often, the story can achieve much more than a logical recounting of facts can. Moreover, stories help us create vivid mental images and experience many things that we would otherwise not experience (Ang, 2014). Jackson (1995) argues that there is a place for stories in the school curriculum as stories:

“...leave us with altered states of consciousness, new perspectives, changed outlooks, and more. They help to create new appetites and interests. They gladden and sadden, inspire and instruct. They acquaint us with aspects of life that had been previously unknown. In short, they *transform* us, alter us as individuals.” (p 9)

Stories, hence, have transforming power and the potential to amplify the efforts of a teacher. It is hence not unusual that at the end of a lesson, a learner’s key takeaway could very well be a story and the lessons that accompany that story. A story “does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (Benjamin, 1968, p 90). When a story lays claim to a space in the memory of the listener, it has the potential to be repeated

someday to someone else. Hence, stories are also powerful tools for the retention of knowledge.

How do teachers tell stories? Because storytelling so often happens incidentally, stories are often told without the audience of peers and we have few accounts of storytelling in the classroom. As a research assistant at the National Institute of Education, I was privileged to observe many social studies classrooms over three years of data collection (2013-2015) and to listen to some of these stories told by teachers. During this period of observation, the curriculum in use was the one before the present 2016 secondary social studies syllabus, organized around “Being Rooted, Living Global” (MOE & UCLES, 2015). This article centers upon four stories. They are not exhaustive, but a selection of some of the more creative and enigmatic stories that I have encountered. The audiences of these stories are students between the ages of 15 to 17. All names used in the following recounts are pseudonyms. Even though the examples given are from the secondary level, the ideas and suggestions in this article can have applications in primary social studies.

### **Moral Story**

Stories are oral and dynamic in nature. When a teacher tells a story, the students are right there. The teacher shapes the story according to the circumstances of the time, and students’ reactions and responses are all part of the telling. The following story was told in response to a comment made by a cynical student in a Normal (Technical) classroom. In this lesson on “Caring for Society”, Ravi taught his students the importance of doing good and contributing to society by giving multiple examples of individuals who had done charity work. Towards the end of the lesson, Ravi asked, “When people do all

these acts of kindness, how do you think they feel?" Most students agreed that it would feel good both to do a kind act and be a recipient of one. But one student did not agree and said, "In Singapore, you help people, people call you a busybody." At this point, as the class was about to end, Ravi introduces this story:

*Let me tell you a story before you go. Two friends were walking along the river, and they saw a scorpion fall into the river. One of them took a branch to rescue the scorpion, and was stung in the process. Pain. Second time, the scorpion again fell into the river, the person took a branch to help it again. So his friend asked him, "Hey, you know the scorpion is going to sting you, right? You already kenna<sup>1</sup> the first time. How come the second time, you still go and help?" The kind person said, "To sting, is the nature of the scorpion. To help, is my nature. The scorpion will not change its nature to sting others. In the same way, I will not change my nature to help others." So you can say, "Oh, Singaporeans are all like that. But how about you? Can you be the change? Eric [cynical student], can you be the change?"*

Ravi likely told this story to show his students the meaning of behaving one way over another. Rather than telling students what they should or should not do, he ended the story with a question to be answered by the listeners themselves. They were to come to their own conclusions. Carrying a simple moral message, such stories are potentially effective because they invite students into a dilemma, bypassing the mental resistance that typically accompanies a more direct telling (Sunwolf, 2004). Through this story, Ravi added the dimension of integrity into the narrative of kindness. Stories like these can help students think how their own values fit in with or differ from societal norms or expectations.

## Personal Story

Teachers sometimes tell personal stories, re-creations of experiences from their own lives (Miller & Mehler, 1994). The following story was likely told to inspire empathy and cultural understanding in students, and to reinforce the point of the chapter that maintaining harmony in society requires consistent effort and empathy from its citizens. Shuwen, a teacher from an all-girls Catholic school, told this story as she rounded up the chapter on "Bonding Singapore" in the secondary three syllabus. This lesson coincided with the Hungry Ghost Festival, celebrated by the Chinese Taoists in Singapore. According to traditional Chinese belief, the gates of Hades open during the seventh month of the lunar calendar for restless spirits to roam the earth to seek resources from their descendants. For a whole month, *faux* money will be burnt and food will be left out in the open to appease these spirits. The festival falls on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the seventh month and is often celebrated with chanting and opera singing. Shuwen had used this opportunity to reinforce her point on how common spaces can at times pose problems for the community. She first shared her personal frustrations with this practice and asked her students whether if given the opportunity, they would move to a place where these rituals were not practiced. The story follows,

*"Now, this practice, we may not believe in it, but a lot of our cleaning uncles and aunties do. I know this because I was in school this month last year. So the uncles and aunties were very fervent. They said our school got what [ghosts]. They were very convinced. So on a Saturday afternoon, they brought their own paper money to burn and conduct these rituals for our school. But you see, their intentions were good. They actually spent*

*their own money and they don't earn a lot of money. They probably make about your allowance plus your tuition fee add together. That's how much they are paid each month and yet they spend their money to actually organize this event. I bumped into an auntie last year in school. The auntie opened the door and I asked, 'Where are you going?' They were going out there. I asked, 'To do what?' They didn't want to tell me. They did it secretly outside the school because our school is a Catholic school and we shouldn't do things like that. It's their way of saying let's bless and protect the school. As much as we might want to criticize, I myself am annoyed by it, but at the same time, I respect that they are doing something of value. I may not do what they do, but I understand and appreciate what they do. Okay? Understand? So the truth is we live in a common space. Even if you stay far away from all the burning, even there, there will be people who are different from you."*

Shuwen not only took time to express and convey her compassion for the cleaning uncles and aunties in the school, but also helped her students understand that having different religious beliefs, in this case Catholicism and Taoism, does not mean that we cannot understand, appreciate, and respect one another. This story reinforces harmony as a national value and can help students consider what it means to live in harmony with people whose beliefs and practices are different from their own. This story also embodies the values of the school community by showing how members of the school, both academic and support staff, have the best intentions for the school and work together harmoniously despite their intentions being manifested in very different ways.

### **Provocative story**

In this next example, under the chapter of "Governance", Philip, a teacher in an independent school, had introduced the concept of big and small government to his secondary three students and then asked for their opinions whether Singapore is a small or big government. This story came towards the end of the lesson. Several students had raised their hands to say it was a big government. One of the students Philip called on said, "There are a lot of laws and people are punished for what they do." Underscoring what her classmate said, another student added, "Even those who commit suicide will be punished." Philip at this point introduced his story,

*"Let me tell you a little story. I was very very young then. And the sad fact for me was that I actually saw it happen. You know there's this belief that if you were unhappy about certain things and want to take revenge on someone, you wear something red. So what this woman did was that she was in a red nightgown in a balcony somewhere. And she basically jumped. I so happened to be up early that morning. I saw her leap off. It wasn't exactly a very ugly sight, to be honest with you. But it was traumatic after I got to know what it was all about. I was still very young then. Her body fell and landed on the ground, it sounded really loud. There was a very loud thud. But what traumatized me after her body fell to the ground was the fact that the police came and handcuffed her. And I asked my mother, 'Why do they handcuff the body?' And my mother said, 'Oh, it's an offence to kill yourself.'"*

Some students appeared bewildered by the story and exclaimed, "But she is already dead!" They could not understand why a dead person should be handcuffed. Today, this practice is no longer carried

out in Singapore, however, periodically such tales are still being told by the older generation to the younger one. Sharing such stories that are uniquely Singaporean helps to build a collection of shared stories among Singaporeans. Pedagogically-speaking, Philip likely told this story to elaborate upon the student's comment about the strict law enforcement with regards to suicide in Singapore. The students were clearly engaged by the story and it achieved a "shock" effect as seen by the reactions of the students.

### Thinking Skill Story

The following story is a departure from the previous three incidental telling of stories as it was carefully crafted by the teacher to teach a thinking skill. In this next example, Raihanna creatively combined storytelling, video, and role-play to tell a story with a purpose. First, she gave students some background to the video clip entitled, *The Jerk* with this guiding question: Can we use what we have learned about reliability to help someone? Then, she introduced three characters: Tom, an eligible bachelor, Joanne, Tom's fiancée, and Veronica, Joanne's friend. She gave the background of the story, "Now what happened is that Tom and Joanne have been engaged for one year, and they are going to get married soon. One day, Joanne goes shopping with her friends to buy things for her wedding. After a while, they are very tired, so they sit by the roadside café chatting and drinking coffee, and while they chatted, they were looking at the street lined with cars."

Then, Raihanna played a video from the angle of the two ladies in the café that showed a car stopping about 50 metres away at a traffic junction. At the same time, a pedestrian was waiting at the traffic junction. From the angle of the café, Tom

was seen by the girls to be kissing a lady with blonde hair in his car. However, from the angle of the pedestrian, we saw that Tom was in fact kissing an Afghan Hound, a dog with long golden fur. Raihanna then asked, "You saw the reaction of Joanna. What do you think you saw from her perspective? What happened after that? She called off the engagement. Can you take out the handout that I just gave you? The handout says, 'Tom needs your help.' Now, doing a source-based question is like solving a real world problem." On the handout were five sources representing varying accounts of the same event from the perspective of each observer (Tom, Joanne, Veronica, Tom's boss, and the pedestrian).

Next, Raihanna asked her students to role-play the characters of Tom, Joanne, and Veronica. She asked, "Now, if I were to only give you these three sources. Tom said he didn't do it but the other two said he did it. Then the conclusion you would have drawn is that he actually two-timed. But now, with these two additional sources, how does this change the meaning?" Next, Raihanna asked two other students to role play the other two characters in the story. The student playing Tom's boss gave his account that he had asked Tom to send his dog for grooming. Another student playing the pedestrian, also gave his account that he saw Tom kissing a beautiful dog. Raihanna then asked the class, "Okay, with the inclusion of these two sources, does it change your conclusion?" From this story, Raihanna proceeded to teach her students the importance of fact-checking and comparing the accounts of different sources.

This story illustrates how having more perspectives or multiple sources of information help in drawing a better conclusion. In the source-based question, students were given sources from a current

affairs issue and were to answer questions based on them. The teacher had transformed the typical socio-political context into a boy-girl-relationship one, and used it to teach fact-checking and cross-referencing, both important elements of thinking and assessing the reliability of sources. Rather than decontextualizing the skills, the teacher embedded them in a familiar and engaging setting, aided with storytelling, video, and role-play to help students apply those skills. Thereafter, Raihanna moved on to the actual source-based question and helped students draw parallels with what they had just learnt. The story, *The Jerk*, has a weakness though. Unbeknownst to the teacher, such simplistic stories can reinforce the stereotype of the unfaithful man and the cheating blonde woman. Teachers must try to avoid bias and stereotyping so as not to teach the wrong values to students (Sim, 2004). This can be avoided by having other colleagues who have different perspectives vet through the lesson plans before implementing them.

Using engaging storylines of real life examples that are relevant to students' daily lives helps students connect more easily with the content and the skills to be learnt. This complex function of storytelling illustrates its potential to provoke more than an emotional and cognitive response, but also to teach the very skills that will be assessed in the examinations. This example shows how contextualized storytelling can be an effective way to teach thinking skills as the narrative structure helps the learner to emotionally engage with the problem, achieving an "integration of the new and unfamiliar alongside that which has been previously incorporated" (Szurmak & Thuna, 2013, p 549).

### **Exploring Storytelling in the Classroom**

These four stories reveal the ways in which stories have been used in the secondary social studies classroom. They are used to teach morals, inspire empathy and cultural understanding, engage students, and facilitate the learning of thinking skills such as fact checking and cross-referencing. Many of these stories are uniquely Singaporean, with teachers using Singlish to bring the stories to life. Many times students participated in the storytelling, as these stories provoked responses. At other times, the teacher, like Raihanna purposefully asked students to role play parts of the story. Stories were told at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the lesson. They were used to teach simple topics such as being a caring and respectful citizen and complex topics such as governance. They may also be incidental or planned.

Having looked at some of the ways teachers have told stories in secondary social studies classrooms, what can we learn from them and how can we also use stories for primary social studies? Before going into the strategies, it is important to note that the ability to comprehend complexities in stories is developmental in nature and younger children have been shown to have difficulty comprehending situations when there is a discrepancy between what has been intended and what actually happens in a story (Bruner, 1985). For example, the theme of deceit is difficult for children to grasp. It may also be difficult for younger students to make the distinction between the subjective and objective (Bruner, 1985). Hence, teachers need to be mindful of the abilities of their learners and choose stories appropriate for their listeners (Sim, 2004). Some teaching ideas, strategies, and suggestions for incorporating stories into the classroom

include:

### 1. Tell more stories

Stories can be told at any point of the lesson to achieve various aims. They can be used to introduce a new topic, conclude an old one, or to reinforce or negate certain points. Teachers can also encourage students to share their own stories with their classmates to give the class alternative perspectives on issues. This can be very useful when students have unique life experiences such as being a foreigner in a country. The teacher's role is then to link students' stories to the learning outcomes of the lesson (Ang, 2014). Like Shuwen and Phillip, teachers can tell personal stories, as students tend to be interested in them. For older students, teachers need not signal that a story is being told, but to begin it in everyday language (Willingham, 2004). For younger students, who have shorter attention spans, engaging them through expressive language, appealing sounds, and physical movement is highly important (Sim, 2004). Story time is an opportunity for teachers to be as creative as they wish to be for a desired effect, they can make use of their voice, language, and gestures to draw students into the story (Wright, 2005). Like Ravi, teachers also need not shy away from telling fables as stories involving animals appeal to many learners. Sim's (2004) article on storytelling for social studies in the primary classroom is a helpful resource on how to tell stories.

### 2. Encourage students to read books and watch movies related to lesson content

Books and movies can be used as teaching aids as the narrative structure helps convey complicated content. For humanities and social studies education, biographies, autobiographies, and

historical fiction are genres that may be suitable. For example, students can be encouraged to read books that give different accounts of the same event, such as *The Singapore Story* by Lee Kuan Yew (Lee, 1998) and *Comet in our Sky*, a compilation of short articles on Lim Chin Siong by Poh Soo Kai (Poh, 2015). If books do not appeal to students, there are also comics and graphic novels such as *The LKY Story – Lee Kuan Yew: The Man Who Shaped a Nation* (Nabeta, 2016) and the award-winning *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Liew, 2015). For younger students, picture books may be more appealing. In another lesson when she was covering the events of the Iraq War, Raihanna had encouraged her students to watch a Bollywood historical drama film called *Airlift*, about the evacuation of Indians during the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. To help convey content in the classroom, teachers can also use edited scenes from films or TV programmes relevant to the topic (Ang, 2014). It is helpful for teachers to have access to a broad base of stories that they can draw upon to contextualize the subject matter for students.

### 3. Structure the lesson according to the story format

Besides telling more stories as appropriate in the classroom and exposing students to relevant books and movies, teachers can also make use of the story format to structure their lessons. One way this can be done is to spend the beginning of the lesson to generate an interest in a problem, creating a conflict, a situation that puzzles and confounds, and then spending the rest of the lesson resolving the problem (Willingham, 2004). This promotes learning as skills and content (and also emotions) are tagged onto a memorable narrative. This works because "stories provide natural connections

between events and concepts” and recalling one part of a story reminds students of another part of the story, “just as hearing one bar of a familiar tune may bring the entire song to mind” (Ang, 2014, p 75). This is similar to what Raihanna had done in her lesson, with the use of the story, *The Jerk*. Egan’s (1986) book, *Teaching as Storytelling*, which is about using the story form to develop a lesson, is a useful resource for teachers who wish to learn how to plan a lesson around a compelling storyline.

### Conclusion

From the four stories described in this article, we see that teachers use stories for different purposes. Stories can be used as a bridge for transforming knowledge into understanding as they seem to come naturally to many teachers as a way to illustrate, explain, and connect with students. In her article, Sim (2004) shares a useful tip that practice is the key to confident and effective storytelling. Through practice, stories are also refined and collected for different occasions. Hence, teachers should not be afraid to experiment with storytelling in their classrooms. Teachers may deliver far more than promised, when they seize upon opportunities that come up or thoughtfully prepare to tell stories in their classrooms. Used appropriately, stories can be a very effective pedagogical tool in the social studies classroom.

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<sup>i</sup> Singapore slang derived from Malay that means to have an unpleasant situation befall one.