

Storytelling, New Technologies, and the Learning Process

A REVIEW OF *INSIDE STORIES: A NARRATIVE JOURNEY* BY JUDY ROBERTSON, LISA GJEDDE, RUTH AYLETT, ROSE LUCKIN, AND PAUL BRNA. LULU.COM, 2008. ISBN: 978-1-4092-0510-4

For anyone unfamiliar with how storytelling supports learning and how new technology can facilitate this process, *Inside Stories: A Narrative Journey*, provides an accessible and entertaining guide to both general theory and practical issues.

Shaped as a narrative of a train journey, the story brings together five strangers travelling across the continent towards the 'Future of Learning' conference; this common destination encourages discussion about education. We learn about storytelling and technology from the different points of view of researchers, teachers, and learners: Jerome, an educational researcher, provides the pedagogical theory; Ada, a computer scientist, expertise with the latest technological toys; Chris, a teacher, the practical view of the classroom; and Alex and Jo, sister and brother, two different views from children. Alex, eight, is quick and an enthusiastic reader; Jo, 12, is dyslexic and prefers movies to books. While Jerome and Chris are hesitant about using technology, both children are quickly attracted to Ada's computer and mobile phone.

What is particularly attractive about the approach is that, for the novice teacher or someone unfamiliar with the topic, the travellers bring us their expertise by engaging in lively, sometimes heated, discussions that give a fair hearing to different, often opposite, perspectives, not only on the theoretical underpinnings of using story and technology in the classroom, but on the practical concerns as well. Because the dialogue is not between peer experts, the explanations provided are straightforwardly clear, and readers participate in the travellers' learning process. The addition of children's voices is unusual, but welcome, as it is children who often take on the role of teachers with new technology.

The first part of the book, 'Storytelling', helps readers understand different aspects of narrative. It begins with a vivid example of how stories grow in schools: Chris shares an urban legend with Jo about a humming plant that spawns a tarantula. This story elicits comments from Jerome on Bruno Bettelheim's theories about children exploring dark themes

in stories within a safe environment. Jo adds a derisive snort about theorist's explanations of what is quite obvious to kids themselves. This pattern of event, explanation, and alternative view is maintained throughout the book and is one of its strengths. Another is that we come to know ideas and events through discussions among people whose biases become evident in their interaction with each other. We are then free to make up our own minds.

This section goes on to define story, describe frame stories, and discuss different genres such as fairytales, folktales, and myths. From structural issues, it moves to why stories work in learning situations, how cultural context provides for different interpretations of stories, and the multiple points of view that stories offer to children. It provides both full-length examples and short excerpts that the travelers discuss in light of theory and classroom applicability.

The second section provides an invaluable resource for teachers who are unfamiliar with new technologies and their use in classroom situations. The authors again offer examples of technology in use from research projects to serious games. Among other activities, the travelers learn to make a role-playing game with the 'NeverWinter Nights Toolset'; they engage with a medieval re-enactment game, 'A Medieval Tale', that works especially well for children with disabilities; they are introduced to making stories using presentation and photo software; they are shown how massive multiplayer online games (MMOs) can be used in education; and they participate in an online blog.

These technologies are presented with enthusiasm but without unrealistic expectations. Neophytes can see that, despite occasional difficulties, working with technology is not difficult and can be beneficial and rewarding for both educators and students.

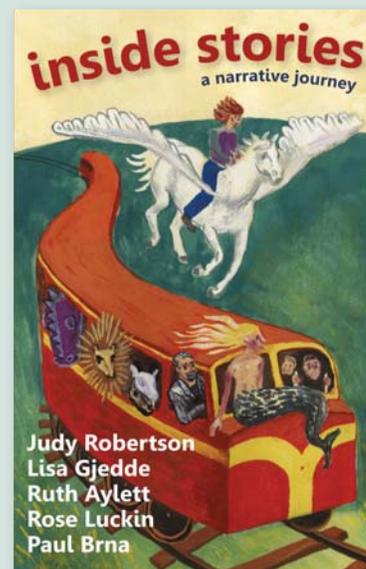
The travellers discuss philosophical and pedagogical, as well as technical, issues. Ada takes the lead in demolishing such oft-repeated myths as 'technology is anti-social' by sharing her ongoing chat with a friend

who is teaching in Kenya. Other topics include the value of imaginative development as a means to understand the world, using software to encourage thinking and dealing with social issues such as bullying, and the transferable skills gained when playing games.

The travellers all appreciate that their ideas have shifted during the journey. This is epitomized by Jerome, who, invited to speak at the conference to "criticize the thoughtless use of technology in learning," changes his talk and presents new ideas gained from his journey, acknowledging that technology can enable some things that were not previously possible in narrative learning.

The authors are seasoned and collegial collaborators who have been involved in a dynamic dialogue about innovative narrative learning environments for over ten years. This book demonstrates their love of storytelling, understanding of technology, and commitment to having one support the other. |

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