

Ulf Schwänke

Storyline and Ideology

How to Avoid Manipulation in Teaching



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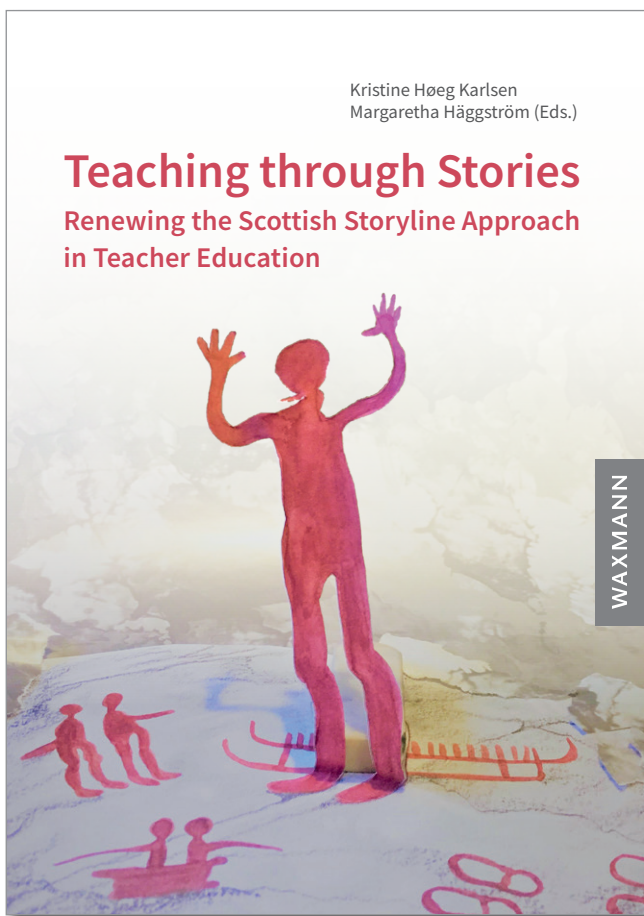
Kristine Høeg Karlsen,
Margaretha Häggström (Eds.)

Teaching through Stories

Renewing the Scottish
Storyline Approach
in Teacher Education

2020, 444 pages, pb, with numerous
coloured illustrations,
€ 49,90, ISBN 978-3-8309-3986-3

E-Book: Open Access
doi.org/10.31244/9783830989868



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Chapter 15

Storyline and Ideology

How to Avoid Manipulation in Teaching

Ulf Schwänke

Abstract. The objective of this chapter is to discuss whether The Storyline Approach (TSA) can be used to manipulate students. The headline question is ‘Can teachers exploit TSA in order to influence students’ beliefs without giving them opportunities to elaborate views of their own?’ The chapter explores the founding principles of TSA and compares these with educational approaches which influence learners without their awareness of, or conscious control over, the process. It is argued that teachers and students who use TSA will, in most cases, avoid the risk of manipulation given that TSA promotes active learning, awareness of the process and autonomous thinking. Conclusion: If TSA holds true to its principles it offers an educational approach that raises students’ awareness of manipulation, helps them to resist it and become collaborative self-confident learners.

Keywords: Principles of Storyline; manipulation of student’s views; ideology; self confident learning

Introduction

Most teachers who use TSA as a teaching strategy do so because they are convinced that it is, first and foremost, an effective strategy. Students who are guided by a meaningful story do not simply proceed ritually through a body of content. Instead, they learn autonomously while tackling problems, discussing difficult tasks, creating models, browsing books or the internet, co-operating on a variety of other activities. In doing so they construct knowledge and generate an understanding of more or less complex issues and interrelationships. While they are clearly learning they are not only enjoying the process and the outcomes while becoming more autonomous in the process. So, over the course of engagement with Storyline students’ motivation grows rather than declines making TSA a powerful pedagogic tool. But if it is powerful – may it also be dangerous? Can it, for example, be used as an instrument of manipulation? This question first arose at a Storyline-conference in 2010 and still remains unanswered: Can you use TSA to impose opinions, or even prejudices, on learners?

The purpose of this chapter is to provide evidence that TSA cannot (or should not) be used to manipulate students so as to make them accept specific ideas or beliefs without the opportunity to develop, and elaborate, a view of their own. Starting with the discrimination between manipulation and influence this chapter discusses the constitutive principles of TSA and ways in which they support self-reliant learning.

Manipulation or Apparent Influence?

Manipulation originally meant doing something with your hands as, for instance, using a tool. But over time the central meaning of the term has been narrowing to denote something being done in a way that escapes others' attention. Sorcerers are masters of manipulation, pulling a rabbit out of a top hat or a coin from your nose. Psychology uses the term 'manipulation' figuratively for purposeful and *hidden* influence in order to control experience and to change the behaviour of persons and groups through inimical or deceptive tactics. Denying this definition some authors (mainly trainers who are using NLP-techniques) assert that there is nothing wrong with manipulation. They argue that every boss tries to manipulate his subordinates and that most spouses attempt to manipulate one another. Such a view does not, however, discriminate between influence and manipulation. But this distinction is crucial. If I influence someone, the affected person notices that I am interested in convincing him or her, giving reasons that might be accepted as substantive. If, on the other hand, I attempt to manipulate, I try to hide my intention; I don't want the other persons to realise that I am trying to impose a particular viewpoint on them.

In everyday life manipulation is a frequent occurrence although we don't always realise it. Advertising and commercials influence us to buy things that we do not necessarily need. On the internet, for example, one has often to agree with the terms and conditions of business in order to gain access to software packages or to important information. Perhaps, of course, you belong to the minority who read 200 pages of legal text before ticking the box. So, you might ask: What is wrong with convincing, perhaps even, manipulating students? Isn't that what school is there for? Shouldn't the younger generation share the convictions of the majority? Think for instance of denominational schools. Isn't it the vested right of parents to decide on the religious beliefs that their children should hold? And what about the pride in one's own nation? Should that not be supported by school? Aren't many students simply too young to understand the complexities of modern life? So, shouldn't we use all the ploys we know so as to help them become adults who then find their place in the society into which they are growing up? Probably quite a number of politicians would patently agree. So, we do have reason to ask: Is TSA an appropriate instrument as a form of manipulative indoctrination? May it easily be used for some sort of brainwashing? Is it a lever to legitimise a totalitarian system? The following example illustrates how Storyline-techniques might be used wrongly in an authoritarian society.

A fictitious example

As a German citizen it would be inimical to lay the blame on people from other countries ruled by 'strong men'. Looking back on the history of my own country – Germany in the 1930s, a decade before I was born, a time in which Germany was governed by a fascist regime led by an uncompromising dictator. Everything was regulated in a totalitarian way by the 'National Socialists' – the Nazi party. There was no freedom of speech, no opportunity to express dissenting opinions, while even the private life of citizens was



Img. 1:
Photo: Ulf Schwänke

monitored by the state and the party. Jews who had lived for generations as Germans were suddenly regarded as enemies of the people. Most of those who weren't able to leave the country in time were later victims of the holocaust.

The educational system in Nazi Germany was tightly supervised. Looking back at this totalitarian, indeed criminal, regime we might well ask: Would Nazi-teachers not gladly have used TSA to persuade their students of the predominance of the Nazi ideology? For instance, there could have been a Storyline about building a future capital for the German 'Reich'. Maybe some Nazi teachers would even have fantasised about building a wall to keep people from other nations out.

Imagine a German teacher in the year 1935. She announces that there will be Olympic Games in Berlin (in reality they were held in 1936 and used to support the Nazi ideology). First step of the Storyline: Every student has to create a person to represent a member of the planning board. What if a student creates a collage figure with black hair (see picture 1)? Will the teacher accept it, or will she allow only 'Aryan' people to be in an elevated position? And if students had come up with collage figures of women? The teacher might well have rejected the idea since, according to Nazi ideology, women had to stay home looking after their children. The next steps of the Storyline might have been painting a frieze, designing an outfit for the athletes, building a box model of the stadium, writing a list of Olympic disciplines and so on. Wouldn't that have been a compelling Storyline? It would appear to look that way. And, as the examples cited demonstrate, it could have been used for manipulative and doctrinaire purposes. Fortunately, perhaps, TSA had not been invented at that period of time, yet authoritarian approaches to education may still be observed in some places. Imagine, for instance, a teacher attending a Storyline-conference who congratulates herself, "At last I have found an instrument to lead students up the path that is best for them. That's the reason why I use TSA. It works so well. The students come to believe everything that the story contains and conclusions to which they are led." Do we accept this teacher's view? Do we agree with her? Or do we argue that this is not the nature of teaching that we think of when we talk about TSA?

TSA Is Not Consonant with Manipulation

There is a case to be made that *if TSA is used for manipulative purposes, it would no longer be the approach generally associated with the term Storyline*. Although it might be said that this is just a personal opinion and that there are teachers likely to hold different views, how might I argue for the validity of the above thesis? This requires a reminder of the essential principles of TSA and of the basic conventions of teaching and learning associated with this approach (see table 1).

- Teachers use *key questions*.
- They promote the student's *ownership* of the story.
- *Mutual Respect* between teachers and students is seen as an important condition of successful learning.
- There is *Openness* to the student's ideas as to the topics of learning.
- The use of *creative techniques* is an essential part of learning with TSA.
- *Collaborative cooperation* among students is genuinely supported.
- Teachers using TSA see *learning as a process of active acquisition* – not simply parroting, or uncritically absorbing, the teacher's standpoint.
- And, not least, teachers using TSA believe that students – in common with all men and women – are human individuals with *inalienable rights*.

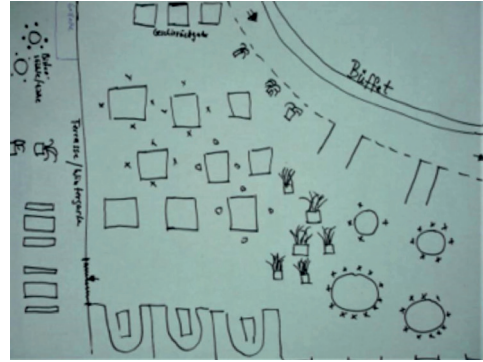
Tab. 1: Some core principles of TSA

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- Key Questions
 - Ownership
 - Mutual Acceptance and Respect
 - Openness
 - Creativity
 - Cooperation
 - Learning as active acquirement
 - Idea of man (human rights)
-

These principles are mentioned – in one form or another – in all comprehensive descriptions of TSA (see e.g. Bell, 2005, Bell & Harkness, 2006, Falkenberg & Håkansson, 2002, Letschert, 2005, Schwänke, 2018, Vos & Dekkers, 1994). Let us examine these traits in more detail.

1. Key Questions

A teacher using TSA asks key questions – these are real inquiries, not questions to which the teacher already knows the answer. A key question is always an open question; the teacher genuinely wants to find out what students think, what they imagine. She is not interested in hearing the one and only 'correct' answer (see Vos & Dekkers, 1994, part 2, p. 59–69). "Who is the president of France?" for example would not qualify as a key question as it simply asks the student to recall a name. The student need not even know what a president is. A key question in contrast could read: "What do you think



Img. 2:
Photo: Ulf Schwänke

will happen, if the French president announces that France will leave the European Union?” Such a question requires students to think in many different ways. They have to use their knowledge about politics and look ahead as to what might happen. They have to imagine what the French president’s objectives might be and they will also start to think about advantages and disadvantages of a ‘Frexit’. So, a key question is whether or not students are able to develop their own thinking, to test their own ideas and, preferably, to discuss and then test them with others. A teacher who uses key questions wants to hear different opinions and well-considered arguments. She will not say “right” or “wrong” but for example, “Can you explain this in more detail?” or, “What might happen, if you do...?” or, “What makes you think that?” The teacher is interested in the student’s thinking and conceptual development. She accepts and respects the student’s views and is open to new ideas. In short: Key questions support critical and independent thinking – the signal enemy of totalitarian brainwashing, see also Chapter 14 about key questions, by Carol Omand.

2. Ownership

Teachers with faith in TSA respect the principle of ownership. It means that – even although the story on which teaching is based was originally invented or related by the teacher – students take part in developing the story step by step (Bell & Harkness, 2006, p. 38). As an example: A class of unemployed older youths created the model of a job centre – a place where you normally have to wait for quite some time to be attended to. The students had designed collage figures (unemployed people and staff of the job centre) and were planning a model in a box of the job centre building. They all agreed that long waiting hours at the job centre was an ordeal for everyone. So, in small groups they worked on the layout of a congenial waiting zone. Their first drafts reflected somewhat conventional ideas. However, while working further on the ground view, more and more ideas began to emerge. One model provided more comfort with a cafeteria and a conservatory (see picture 2). Another group of students came up with the idea of a waiting zone with a lawn in which people could sit on the grass or even walk around barefoot (see picture 3). And as students from another group challenged them about the vagaries of weather, they constructed a removable glass-roof that could be closed in order to keep out rain and snow. These students did not simply indulge their frus-



Img. 3:
Photo: Ulf Schwänke

tration about long waiting hours and time spent in barren corridors of public agencies but developed a dream – what would it be like to be treated as customers, rather than supplicants? In so doing they gave new impetus to teaching and learning. What started as a lesson in empathy with people looking for a job (or at least an unemployment allowance) became a lesson in the value of autonomous thinking. And autonomous thinking in itself is the enemy, or antidote, to manipulative indoctrination.

3. Mutual Acceptance and Respect

A teacher who follows – at least partially – the principle of ownership must be ready to accept students as agents who help shape the trajectory of lessons. I vividly remember five groups of students creating a box model of a stage for the European Song Contest (cf. Kommnick & de Buhr, 2009). All of the children taking part in this activity were from special schools in different countries. Some of them could neither read nor write. But all were able to invent a programme for the song contest, build a stage, create costumes, invent names and biographies of singers and solve a number of problems. The teachers watched the students' activities attentively, but interfered only by asking a question once in a while. One of the incidents in these lessons, for instance, was to consider a fire that some mischievous person had set to the stage. After a brief brainstorming session every group put forward a viable suggestion as to how the planned concert could be saved. It was moving to observe ways in which teachers encouraged their students and showed their pride in students' progress. Teachers who wish to manipulate their students, are unlikely to accept other than their own preconceived ideas and are more likely to try and impose their own (or their superior's) opinions on them. In a totalitarian environment (which can also be a class at school) there is only one agenda that has to be followed by everyone – with no disagreement permitted. Any attempt to do this while working with the TSA would soon founder given that the story relies on the contributions of the learners and the teacher's willingness to appreciate them.

4. Openness

In following a story, teachers and students will, in most cases, come across unexpected obstacles or unforeseen problems (Bell & Harkness, 2006). That is when school work becomes interesting. One example:

In a Glasgow primary school, a teacher had started a topic about a police station. The students had created collage figures and their biographies, built a box model of the police office including a cell for the usual drunkards and so on. Then the teacher asked about the working hours of policemen and women. As it is well known that criminals work at any time, the students invented a time schedule with two day shifts. Then one little boy stood up and said, “Look, the morning shift drives their patrol cars to the police station at about 1:45 or 1:50 p.m., gets inside and changes from their uniforms into plain clothes. The late shift comes at 2 o’clock sharp and starts to put on their uniforms. If I wanted to rob a bank, I would do it at exactly 2:00 o’clock because then no one at the police station would be ready for action.” This argument was so convincing that the students created an overlapping shift schedule, in which the second shift started 20 minutes before the first shift stopped. After the class was finished with this subject, they all visited a real police station and compared everything they saw with their own ideas. When the topic of working hours was raised, one of the students said: “And of course you have an overlapping shift schedule.” The policeman was surprised. “What’s that?” he asked. So the boy explained. Then the policeman said. “I’m afraid we don’t have that. But it’s a very good idea.” No student of that class is likely to ever forget that moment. Both – the teacher and the policeman – were open to an idea that had not been previously thought of. The purpose was not simply to endorse current practice but to promote the ability of students to find adequate solutions to intractable problems. In common with students, the police themselves were open to a new approach. A more indoctrinate and authoritarian teacher would generally not be open to students’ ideas or challenge to their authority. If convinced (or led to believe) that there is only one truth she might be successful in influencing or manipulating the students but could not claim to be honouring the principles and practice of TSA.

5. Creativity

Many parents (and some teachers) are sceptical as to whether ‘all this hands-on work’ isn’t a waste of time – time that could better be invested in ‘real learning’ (cf. Schwänke & Plaskitt, 2016). On the contrary, the founders of TSA were convinced, “that creativity and pupil engagement are linked; in creative classrooms, children show persistence and engagement with their learning” (Bell & Harkness, 2006, p. 4). They demonstrate that genuinely creative work on the part of their students offers a multitude of opportunities, for example, to:

- develop new ideas,
- test assumptions,
- share experiences,
- collaborate in arts such as painting, singing, acting, drawing, sculpting, playing an instrument and so on,
- deal with unexpected incidents,
- discuss personal views with other students etc.

The results of such activities are not judgements as to ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ but at best as plausible or more or less convincing. That is why more doctrinaire teachers are less likely to welcome divergent student creativity as they are accustomed to evaluating student’s work resting on their own authority or preconceptions. They are less open to surprise, less open to being wrong or accepting their own vulnerability. By contrast, teachers, who use TSA authentically will neither extol nor condemn but rather ask further probing questions such as, “Can you think of another solution to the problem you’ve been working on?” or, “What is the advantage of X in comparison to...?” In doing so, they encourage autonomous learning and demonstrate confidence in the nature of students’ reasoning that lie behind their ideas and propositions.

6. Cooperation

The examples given above also illustrate that cooperation – another cardinal principle – is difficult to reconcile with indoctrination. If students are encouraged to work in small groups – or even as a whole class together – they will invariably come up with divergent ideas because it is exciting to discover something new, something no one had thought of before. As an old English saying reads, “The brain runs on fun.” In addition, students who work together learn to compromise, to appreciate the ideas of their classmates, and are not content to simply accept the first proposition offered. They also learn to respect the views of their classmates, leading to a greater likelihood that they will not simply accept opinions based on authority without justification.

7. Learning as Active Acquirement

In the end there is a fundamental difference between TSA and traditional teaching derived from behaviourist principles (cf. for instance Merrill, 1991). The authoritarian teacher is likely to believe that students simply learn what is taught from a source of unquestioned expertise. If the students haven’t learned what they were taught, then it is obvious that they haven’t listened carefully enough, haven’t paid attention or are simply too stupid. The idea underpinning this ideological stance is that students are told what they ought to believe and that learning is primarily a form of transition of content, as is common in public oratory. If the content is not understood or people still don’t do what they are expected to do, they need to be further convinced (what in behaviourists language is described as “conditioning”). TSA follows a different protocol and set of principles. Learning is seen as an active process (see Schwänke & Gronostay, 2007). Students acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes by working cooperatively on challenging problems. Teachers who are familiar with TSA know that it is futile to tell students what they ought to think. Instead, they create a learning situation in which it is fun to solve some of life’s conundrums. They understand that successful learning is not only a cognitive process but imbued with emotions – not something that can be developed by dictate.

8. The Idea of Man, Human Rights

So – what does all this mean for the idea of man – or woman (our imagination of what makes us humans)? Teaching can be seen as shaping human beings in accordance with a predominant ideology. From this point of view students are indispensable as future workers, consumers, tax payers or soldiers in need of guidance and direction rather than individual freedom. But teaching can also be seen as a process, one that supports young people in becoming free citizens who develop their own ideas and use their own thinking processes (cf. Grabbe-Letschert, 2005, p. 95). This view supports ideas from the age of the Enlightenment, that all humans are born free, that they have the same rights and that freedom finds its limits where the rights of fellow humans are violated.¹ If we acknowledge and respect human dignity, as we do in Storyline-courses, manipulation is not an option. Nonetheless, it is incontrovertible that in some places in the world teachers try to press students into the mould of the prevailing political system. There are countries where there is no religious freedom, where female students are discriminated against, where evolutionary theory is rejected and where logical thinking may be welcomed, although in theory but not in practice.

There may be teachers who do not honour their students' opinions yet still believe that they are following TSA. They may proudly announce, "Look at this frieze, at the collage figures, the word banks, the box models." Such teachers may see TSA as a kind of recipe, or showpiece while failing to recognise that it is much more than simply a method. Rather, it has to be understood as an educational approach where the learner and the learning process are centre stage, neither the teacher nor the content. This idea was expressed in 2003 by Cambridge professor John MacBeath whose keynote at the International Storyline-conference in Elsinore warned that TSA would only survive if it was regarded not as a method but a pedagogy – a system of self-determined and collaborative learning.

If TSA is not seen as just another method (requiring the students to follow in single file or in blind trust) but rather as a pedagogy, there is conviction that every student will eventually find his or her own path. Teachers in this mould regard themselves as enablers, counsellors, facilitators – not as directors or manipulators. They organise learning in a way that engages and fascinates, not simply feeding their students, or fostering and reinforcing dependency.

1 Think e.g. of Baruch Spinoza who advocated democracy, individual liberty, freedom of expression and eradication of religious authority or of Immanuel Kant who wrote: 'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity (or: nonage). Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This immaturity is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Dare to know! (Sapere aude. = Have the courage to use your own understanding!) is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.'

Conclusion

Teachers – and of course student teachers too, who use TSA as intended by its creators and who apply the above-mentioned principles will, in most cases, avoid the risk of manipulation. There is, however, a reason to be vigilant. We are living in a climate where people in positions of authority, politically and socially may lay claim to ‘facts’ as opposed to ‘alternative facts’. Where truth is made a matter of expedience, economic or political power, it is not unlikely that pressure on schools and teachers will follow. If teachers under such pressure are forced to adopt a given ideology, and teach accordingly, they should not even attempt to embrace TSA. Not only is there too great a danger of failing but there are also risks of damaging the integrity of the ‘brand’. Students will all too easily notice the contradiction between the educational approach and the content ‘delivered’ by the teacher. If, on the other hand, TSA is to remain resilient and transformative it will stay true to its principles, a powerful tool which immunises students against manipulation and empowers them to become, and remain, self-confident and collaborative learners.

Acknowledgment

I am very much indebted to Prof. John MacBeath, not only for proofreading this chapter but even more so for introducing me – back in the year of 1979 – to three staff tutors at the Jordanhill College of Education: Steve Bell, Sallie Harkness, and Fred Rendell, who developed the teaching model that is now known as The Storyline Approach.

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