



Telling tales: the role of religion in schools

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine your life without stories. What would you miss most? Those distant childhood recollections of much-loved bedtime stories; trips to the cinema that made you laugh, cry and shriek in horror; or long travel journeys made special by the companionship of a favourite author? Take stories away from your life and what is left other than a series of one-dimensional, disconnected events that make little sense.

The power of the story for human existence cannot be disputed. Stories help us make sense of our lives; they give us our bearings and connect us to one another, our past and our future. Stories take away from the everyday, the mundane, and help us view the world, as a wise man once said, from some "more central region". If you like, they are the medium by which, in the end, we come to know the truth about ourselves and our existence. In short, stories are the ultimate human playground that we never grow out of.

Lessons to be learnt

Talking of playgrounds, let's think together for a moment about schools. They are full of stories, aren't they? Well, yes, if you mean stories like *The Hungry Caterpillar*, *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Harry Potter*. But what about those stories that connect us to something deeper – those which lift our eyes beyond the 'here' and dare to speak of 'God' himself?

The role of schools in society has divided opinion since the time of Plato, particularly when it comes to teaching religion. I am thinking of my friend, for example, who owns a T-shirt which says: "Don't pray in our schools; we will not think in your church!".

Clearly, even today, consensus is difficult to achieve and tends to give way to four, broad opinions:

Total immersion: Faith-based schools that actively promote a particular religion or faith 'story'. For such schools, acts of worship (celebrating the story) form part of the weekly educational programme.

Total avoidance: Faith is banned from the classroom on the grounds that it has no place in schools. We simply have to leave our stories at the school gate.

Total neutrality: Religion is introduced into the curriculum but, in an effort to stay 'neutral', the great religious stories are reduced to a series of 'top 10' facts and memorised like the colour of our national flags.

Totally unwrapped: Finally, there is the 'candy bar' approach. Here, religious traditions are viewed as 'wrappers' – disposable trappings that can be peeled away from the true 'essence' of human spirituality. In other words, it is not the story that is important, rather the so-called 'truth' behind it.

Many of us may well recognise our own classroom experience in one of these four approaches. For me, however, questions still remain.

Stories are the medium by which, in the end, we come to know the truth about ourselves and our existence

Take, for example, a typical classroom at the school where I work. Students from the International School of Brussels come from 70 different nationalities, from literally every corner of the globe. So the question we face every day is "Whose story do you tell?", just as much as it is "Whose history do you teach?".

Indeed, what are we to do? Try and ignore it? Keep on pretending that we can somehow take up a neutral position on these issues? Set up a multifunctional space that can be used as a chapel one day and a synagogue the next? And, then, where do you stop? When we talk about 'inclusion', do we really mean to say that we welcome students who may wish to celebrate 'stories' that are generally considered to be violent, anti-social or inhumane?

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Happy endings?

There is no easy resolution here. But, then again, the 'quick fix' is what stories (good ones, at least) always deny us. They tie a knot, spin a web, leave us wondering, fill us with dangerous emotions and will not let us go. They leave us changed, not because we necessarily *understand* the story – but because we have dared to wrestle with it.

Good schools are places that teach students how to tell powerful stories – including their tales of faith and belief – in a complex world.

The best schools, though, are those that also teach students how to listen to the stories of others, whereby we better understand our own. Philosophers call this "open confessionism": the tricky business of standing up for what we believe, yet having the humility to accept that sometimes we discover the *truth* in stories told by people who are different from us.

Dr David Willows is Director of External Relations at the International School of Brussels and author of "Divine Knowledge: A Kierkegaardian Perspective On Christian Education" (Ashgate Publishing, 2001).

For further discussion:

Books on religious education are easy to find. However, why not try a 'novel' approach and pick up a copy of Jill Paton Walsh, *Knowledge of Angels* (Black Swan, 1998). Set on a remote medieval island, this story will take you on a challenging journey, asking complex questions along the way about where truth comes from, the role of the church in society, and how we know anything with certainty.

Feedback and comments on this article are welcomed by the author: willowsd@isb.be

Well-chosen words at the British School of Brussels

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak." These wise words were never more pertinent than on 21 February when, for the first time, three Year 12 students from the BSB competed in a preliminary round of the BBC Public Speaking Awards.

The outcome was to prove very exciting for the school – two of the three participants earned a place in the national finals and are now busily refining and practising their speeches in preparation for the big day!

This prestigious, European-wide, competition is run by the BBC, under the auspices of the English Speaking Union, and is open to students aged 16 to 20. The winner of the Belgian final will go forward to the international final in London.

The ability to speak well is given a high priority at the BSB. Students



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Alexander Shea

Up for discussion

Beyond the classroom, many extra-curricular activities are also designed to provide students with opportunities to enhance and develop their expertise. The Debating Society meets weekly and works on specific skills through a range of teaching methods including, of course, lively debate! Public speaking coaching sessions also offer students the chance to write effective arguments and then transform them into powerful speeches.

Learning to speak well in public helps create confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens – high priorities at BSB!

For more information: Sandra Ralston, Head of English, British School of Brussels www.britishschool.be



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Thijs Welten

learn the art of both speaking and listening in a variety of ways. In the classroom, such skills are taught and assessed at all levels as a part of the curriculum. Students present topics, report back to large groups, debate and discuss.

In the weekly assemblies, they are given regular opportunities to speak in front of a larger audience of their peers on a wide range of subjects: extra-curricular activities, trips, and charity initiatives, to name but a few.



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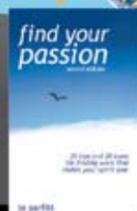
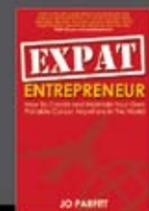
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