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Story and curriculum

Kieran Egan, in his book *Teaching as Storytelling*,¹ proposes that we see curriculum as a story told by teachers, a story composed of all the little stories associated with the various areas of learning and their many different topics. He puts this forward as an alternative to seeing curriculum in the traditional ‘assembly line’ way in terms of aims, objectives, content, method and evaluation. He argues that a story-telling approach is more true to how we learn and come to understand (something of which we saw in the previous chapter). Where Plato saw pitfalls, Egan sees potential – story can promote deeper learning because it engages the whole person, involving the imaginative and affective rather than solely the cognitive.² He argues that if curricular

¹ Egan, 1988.

² On this point see also Fernhout, 1997.

material is presented in story form instead of being couched as cold information, more children will learn better.

While Egan is not concerned with the biblical story, his work does raise in an interesting way the question of how our faith shapes our storytelling. Which stories should enter or inform our curriculum? Will any story do or do we face the necessity of hard choices? We begin this chapter with two pairs of stories that may be told in the school curriculum. They will face us immediately with the controversiality of curricular narratives.

Two pairs of stories

The first of these pairs comes from Egan. In teaching a unit on the topic of communities to six-year-old children, he suggests that a village/town/city may be portrayed in two very different ways. One tells a story of desperate and inventive survival, the other one of largely unseen and creeping destruction.

In the first, the children are led to think of the community as waking up one morning to find itself surrounded by a high, thick steel wall. The wall has the effect of totally cutting the community off from the world outside, including its water, electricity and telephone lines. The taken-for-granted comes to be seen in a new and different light. Food and water can no longer be assumed to be available. The community comes to be seen as “a machine which people have made to help our survival and fend off destruction”, and the local supermarket “not as a routine prosaic aspect of community life, but as one of the wonders of the world...a miracle of human ingenuity and organizational skill”.³

He then moves on to suggest a different story which could be told to teach the same topic. This time the community is an organism, not a pleasant creature but a malevolent one which is out to consume and destroy in the interests of its own survival. At the beginning of the story, it is a small creature which settled down by the river but,

As the years went by, it grew by drinking the pure water
and dirtying it as it passed through and by eating away at

³ Postman, 1996:45,47.

the surrounding land. It became bigger and fatter and more monstrous, and grew faster and faster. It sent tentacles (roads) deep into the countryside to get food from more and more distant places to satisfy its ever-growing appetite, destroying the natural woods and meadows. Some tentacles ripped up the land to get minerals and fuels which it ate in its factories, dirtying further the land, air and water.⁴

A curriculum, even for six-year-old children and in a down-to-earth subject area, can tell different stories. Embedded in them lie different value positions, in this case celebration of the powers of human ingenuity versus lament for human destructiveness.

Another pair of examples comes from the teaching of biology with rather older students. The focus this time is not on stories that are actually told as such, but rather on the stories that may be implicit in our organisation and presentation of curriculum material. In a chapter in Mark Roques' book *Curriculum Unmasked*,⁵ a teacher tells of an experience he had in his first teaching post in a large comprehensive school in England. He found that implicit messages were being imbibed by students through their experience of the whole curriculum. Where they met with conflicting implicit messages, they had to find a way of resolving the conflict in favour of one or the other. At the centre of his account is a series of booklets prepared by the teachers for use in biology lessons with twelve-year-old students. Their theme was the variety of living things and they looked first at fish and then moved on through amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. The teacher writes:

The whole thrust of the study was evolutionary and as the pupils worked through the booklets the underlying message was "look how good fish are at turning into amphibia" and so forth...the power of the hidden message was such that the pupils automatically assumed that the process was inevitable, unguided and within the time spans of their own experience ... life is a chance phenomenon, something that has developed through a

⁴ Postman, 1996:50-51.

⁵ Roques, 1989:161-164.

process of unguided evolution. None of my colleagues would ever have said this openly to their pupils, indeed a number of them were Christians and would have been horrified at the thought, but the way we put our curriculum together meant that our pupils imbibed (learnt is not the accurate way to describe the process since it bypassed their critical faculties) this particular message. And it implicitly undermined their confidence in God.⁶

Having discovered this undermining of confidence, not in a biology lesson but in a lesson in religious education which he also taught, the teacher raised the issue of implicit stories with his colleagues in the biology department. The ordering of the material in a particular way was leading the students to construct a story of a process which excluded God. The outcome of this discussion was that, as the teacher writes,

We simply looked for another biological principle that could be taught through a study of the variety of life, but which did not carry an implicitly anti-God message. We used the principle of adaptation so that the booklets now conveyed the notion “look how good the fish are at being fish” and so on. This perfectly acceptable biological message is compatible with, reinforces even, the Christian belief in the Creator God.⁷

Again, curriculum can tell more than one story, only this time we are concerned not with the overt use of the story form to deliver the curricular content, but rather with an implicit background story that influences how the material is arranged.

These pairs of examples give evidence of the range of stories that the curriculum may tell and that it may do so at all levels of education and in various individual subject-areas. In some respects these stories overlap, in others they conflict. Some are more compatible with the story the Bible tells us while others seem less so, even though they may at the same time convey truths and genuine insights. This brings us to the question of how the curriculum story can be biblical.

⁶ Roques, 1989:162-163.

⁷ Roques, 1989:164.

Telling the big story in the curriculum

What matters in all this is not primarily whether we use stories in our teaching, e.g. reading or telling Bible stories or other stories to our students. It is not so much what little story we tell in a unit of work or the syllabus for a subject-area. The deeper question is what larger account may be implicitly offered at the same time. What matters is which big stories, which meta-narratives, the students are being told explicitly or implicitly.⁸

We have already mentioned various alternative big stories – stories that speak of the glories of technological progress, the joys of consumption, the overriding importance of economic utility or the dangers of environmental degradation. Intersecting with these, now overlapping, now opposing, are the foundational stories of the human condition told by communities of faith. For orientation in this narrative melee Christians turn to the Big True Story of the Judaeo-Christian God and his actions in creation and redemption.

The Bible itself comes to us mainly in narrative form.⁹ It is full of stories, and those parts of it that are not stories presuppose the true story that runs right through the book. Some of the stories are probably fiction, e.g. many if not all of the parables of Jesus. But they are told against a historical background, one of God's action in human history, and they are told to shed light on the larger true story told throughout Scripture. The Bible's story is both a mirror in which we see truth about ourselves and a window through which we see God and God's world out there, past, present and future. It is this biblical

⁸ It could be objected at this point that a narrative approach is simply a different name for an approach in terms of communicating a Christian worldview or of developing 'a Christian mind'. John Bolt has argued that it is more than these – see Bolt, 1993 especially his chapter 4 'The Christian Mind: Necessary but not Sufficient' and chapter 6 'The Christian Story and the Christian School'. In response, Harry Fernhout suggests that story is best understood as 'the matrix of a world view': a world view does not provide stories but, rather, "an embracing, plausibility-giving story provides a world view ... we could say that a world view is a kind of condensation or shorthand (a first ordering) of a life-shaping story" (Fernhout, 1997:85-86).

⁹ On the significance of this for theology, see Hauerwas & Jones, 1989.

big true story, the meta-narrative of creation, fall and redemption or, as one writer characterises the ‘chapters’ of the Christian story, ‘God, Creation, Fall, Covenant, Jesus Christ, Church, Salvation, Consummation, God’,¹⁰ with which we are concerned in relating the Bible narratively to education.

The biblical story

Obviously Bible stories can form a direct part of the content of education. But what about all of the other stories which explicitly or implicitly make up the curriculum? How can a curriculum story be biblical? How does the biblical meta-narrative relate to all these alternative narratives or gods? Do they contain insights which are true and biblical (perhaps in part because they have arisen in cultures which have themselves been strongly influenced and shaped by the Bible) even if other elements and, in particular, their main thrust is neither true nor biblical? Again, on what basis do we choose among the stories on offer?

It is instructive to look at two writers whose work has figured prominently in our discussion, Egan and Postman. What do they have to say on the issue of which story to choose? In his *Teaching as Storytelling*, Egan looks for “educational criteria” for choice and these are mainly about meaningfulness (including affective meaningfulness), coherence, relevance and what he terms “the power of the story”.¹¹ A good story, he suggests, should work with a binary set of opposing categories (such as success/failure or survival/destruction) which set up the initial conflict. It should then work with this tension and gradually move towards a resolution, taking care to exclude material which does not advance the story. Now all of this is helpful if what we are looking for is formal criteria for identifying an effectively told story. But what if our question concerns how to choose between competing stories which are both meaningful and relevant? How does the teacher decide whether to teach the human ingenuity version of Egan’s lesson on community or the environmental destruction version? Here Egan does not really help us.

¹⁰ Gabriel Fackre points out that the story has a prologue and an epilogue and both of these are God – see Fackre, 1984:12-13.

¹¹ Egan, 1988:24-25,29-31.

Postman clearly wishes us to reject some stories and adopt others. Those which we should reject are termed ‘false gods’.¹² He promotes those which should take their place in terms of adequacy, meaning, purpose and identity. He writes,

The purpose of a narrative is to give meaning to the world, not to describe it scientifically. The measure of a narrative’s ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’ is in its consequences: Does it provide people with a sense of personal identity, a sense of community life, a basis for moral conduct, explanations of that which cannot be known?¹³

Although the criteria suggested by both Egan and Postman are of great importance, they do not fully address the question of which story is true, i.e. true to what is the case about human existence and purpose. This question is either being side-stepped or reduced to a matter of something other than truth. The fascist, communist and Nazi stories that Postman regards as “catastrophic narratives”¹⁴ *did* provide people with a sense of meaning and identity and even gave them what they apparently took to be a basis for moral conduct. Perhaps this is why, when later in his book he puts forward “the fallen angel story”¹⁵ (see further in the next section) and the importance of keeping “multiple narratives” in view, he brings in substantive moral values, appealing to the need to be humble and open to the possibility of being mistaken.¹⁶ There seems to be a need for a more substantial place to stand if we are to discern which stories deserve retelling and which should be left on the shelf.

The fittingness of curriculum stories

As well as offering individual Bible stories which could become part of the content of curriculum, perhaps the Bible’s larger story about human

¹² See, for example, Postman, 1996:11.

¹³ Postman, 1996:7.

¹⁴ Postman, 1996:6.

¹⁵ Postman, 1996:66-70, 114-128.

¹⁶ Postman, 1996:67,60.

existence offers such a point of orientation. If (as we do in this book) we take the biblical meta-narrative to be true, we seem to have a standpoint from which it may be possible to judge the truth or falsity of competing narratives, although it does not follow that these competing narratives will be false in their entirety. How true or false they may be is a matter of how well they *fit* with the Big True Story of the Bible.

Consider again the image of Shakespearean actors working on the missing Act V of the play that we looked at earlier.¹⁷ Some versions of Act V would not fit well with the master's Acts I to IV, while others would fit well with them. It is not a matter of proceeding deductively to a completely prescribed version, nor is it possible to reduce the sense of 'fit' to a single logical criterion. A whole range of possibilities are available and another whole range would be ruled out because of their mismatch. It is not simply a matter of the individual ingredients that could go into the final act, the characters, actions and events, but of the overall 'contours' of the story and a sense of rightness about its ending. Curriculum stories are true to the Big True Story in so far as they comport well with it.

There are ingredients in a number of the stories we have looked at which overlap with those of the biblical story. For example, Postman's 'fallen angel' story recognises the fallenness of human nature. On the other hand, he sees it mainly in a propensity to make mistakes, and he sees our angel-like quality in our capacity to correct our mistakes "provided that we proceed without hubris, pride or dogmatism; provided that we accept our cosmic status as the error-prone species".¹⁸ As he describes it, this could be simply the outcome of our finiteness: we are limited in our knowledge and understanding and because of this we make mistakes. The biblical account of fallenness, on the other hand, is in terms of our sinfulness rather than our finiteness as creatures, of our rebellion against divine authority rather than our lack of omniscience. It is this that calls us not only to humility but also to repentance and faith.

Turning to the biology booklets, the 'Look how good fish are at being fish' story has ingredients in common with the 'Look how good fish are at turning into amphibians' one. It is even made up of the same information, the same facts about the capabilities of the various life

¹⁷ See chapter 5, pages 63-64.

¹⁸ Postman, 1996:67.

forms studied. However, the overall story is rather different. The first version has more in common with the story of the ascent of man, one of steady upward progress, than of God's creation of a world of wonderful variety and adaptation, a world now fallen but to be recreated by God at the end.

Contrasting narrative shapes

The idea of *shape* may be helpful here. The two stories told in the biology booklets may contain the same ingredients, but these have been patterned differently and so do not have the same contours. Change the shape of the story and the underlying message shifts.

A look at a well-known passage in Philippians chapter 2 could be instructive at this point. This is the hymn in verses 6 to 11 that tells of how Christ Jesus was in very nature God but did not think equality with God something to be grasped and made himself nothing. A number of commentators have suggested that this passage cannot be fully appreciated unless it is seen as a conscious play upon the Adam motif from Genesis chapters 1-3. Line by line, step by step, there is here a contrast with Adam as can be seen from the following chart:¹⁹

Adam	Christ
Made in the divine image	Being in the image of God
thought it	thought it not
a prize to be grasped at	a prize to be grasped at
to be as God;	to be as God;
and aspired to a reputation	and made Himself of no reputation
and spurned being God's	and took upon Him the form of a
servant	servant
seeking to be in the like-	and was made in the likeness of
ness of God;	men;
and being found in fashion	and being found in fashion as a
as a man (of dust, now doomed)	man
he exalted himself,	He humbled Himself,
and became disobedient	and became obedient unto death,
unto death.	God highly exalted Him and gave
He was condemned and disgraced.	Him the name and rank of Lord.

¹⁹ Thompson, 1998:18.

Now one could take these two columns and compare the statements made about Adam and about Christ one by one. But there is another kind of comparison to be made. The shape, the contours, of the story of the first Adam and that of the last Adam are completely different, indeed they are reverse images of one another. Where the first Adam seeks to raise himself to the heights of heaven, Christ steps down, down to the lowest place. Where the first Adam is brought low, Christ is raised to the heights. The one story starts low down, climbs in a proud curve and is then cast down lower than its beginning; the other begins in the heights, descends through humility and turns to soar up again into glory. The story of Christ forms a curve which is the exact inversion of that formed by Adam's story. Simply taking the statements made about Adam and Christ and comparing them one by one would miss this broader pattern. Behind the point-to-point comparison is an overall shape that comes through the details, and which must be grasped more by an intuitive judgment than a logical deduction.²⁰

It is this element of *shape*, of patterning, that makes this approach to linking the Bible and education different from the more linear relationships that we have considered in approaches based on biblical statements or presuppositions. Different stories can carry conflicting shapes which express conflicting visions of life. The shape of one story can judge the shape of another, as in the case of Christ and Adam. We see another example when Jesus describes a rich man telling himself a self-congratulatory tale of growing wealth. Jesus opposes the steady upward incline of the rich man's tale with a story in which the rich man dies suddenly and mysteriously in the night – the upward slope is interrupted by a sudden cliff.²¹ In fact a common feature of Jesus' teaching is the telling of stories which upset the tales that we are used to hearing and telling ourselves from day to day. If one story can judge another through its contrasting shape, then the distinctive contours of biblical narratives may call into question some of the stories about life which implicitly underpin the school curriculum. This is the process suggested by the examples discussed in the last two chapters.

²⁰ Such more intuitive judgments are more to the fore in accounts of faith that emphasise the 'self-authenticating' nature of divine revelation. See Shortt, 1991; Wolterstorff, 1982.

²¹ Luke 12:16-20. Compare Jeremiah chapter 44 for a further example of narrative conflict.

Story can in its own right offer a point of connection between the Bible and the curriculum. But what are the characteristic promises and perils of proceeding by way of story? This will be the topic of our next chapter.