

## Storyline

“An Approach to Effective Teaching and Learning.”

“An Interview with one of the Founders.”

Bruce W. Lander

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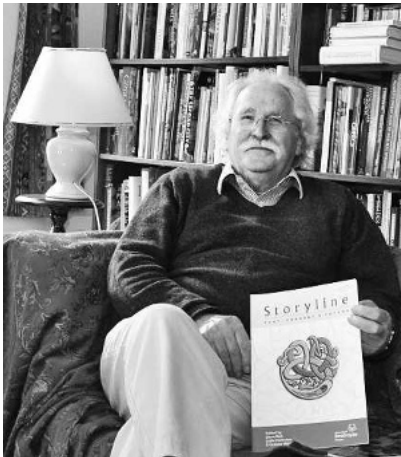
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### 要 約

教師は従来、豊富な知識を備えた権威の象徴とみなされてきました。教師の役目は、教科書を用い、知識を学習者に伝えることでした。この関係は権威であり支配でした。この視点からみると、教育は学習内容（提示学習要素）を含むが、学習の方法・手順（既有知識を用いての実践・応用力）を含んでいません。ストーリーラインは、完全に学習者中心の学習方法によるものです。学習者が物語を考案し、教師はただ学習者が道からそれないようにします。ストーリーラインは、1970年代にスコットランドの小学校で考案されました。学習者は勉強してきたことから自分自身のモデルを創り上げることを奨められます。またカギとなる質問に答えることを通して学習者は、本当の証拠や情報収集に基づいて自分達の仮説が正しいかどうか試すことができます。この論文はストーリーラインを用いた学習過程について、創始者とのインタビューを通して、論じています。

The EFL trade, unlike no other, is constantly in search of new emerging methods. However, very few take the traditional roles of teacher-centred learning

and transform them in a convincing and autonomous way, into a more student centred learning approach. Storyline though, is a unique method that does just this. Devised originally for elementary school content-based teaching, storyline is a set of processes whereby the pupils are encouraged to construct their own models of what is being studied, through answering key questions, before testing their hypotheses with real evidence and research. Together the learner and teacher create a scenario through visualisation through the construct of materials and gathering of data for their story. Rather than learners being mouth fed knowledge and information in the more traditional teacher-centred style, Storyline adopts an entirely learner-centred approach where the students create the story and the teacher merely keeps them on track.



On a recent home trip last summer I discovered that the roots of this very approach are in my homeland, south of my rural hometown in Glasgow at Strathclyde University. Not only this, but one of the key founders, Steve Bell who developed this autonomy centred approach, lives just round the corner in the next village.

Steve Bell, retired Professor of Strathclyde University and originator of the Storyline approach is now director of Storyline Scotland and chairman of the European Association for Educational Design. His roles therein involve promoting the use of Storyline internationally in a critical and innovative way by sharing ongoing research, resources, curriculum development and applications of the method. At present this emerging approach is widely used in Scotland, the

Scandinavian countries, the USA, the Netherlands, but also in a number of other countries, such as Thailand, Hongkong, Singapore, Lithuania, Greece, Turkey and Portugal.

Storyline, although originally intended for primary education in the UK now has a following in foreign language teaching and from nursery to higher education in native language environments all over the world and is being developed as a medium for language teaching in Germany too. In this interview Steve Bell explains the process and principals of storyline, in the UK and abroad, describing how storyline works as a language teaching methodology.

One simple precept of learning “*good learning is playful*” is the basis for Storyline. MacBeath, in Bell et al (2007) states that “*there is now a wide theoretical consensus that as learners we ‘construct’ our understanding*”. Storyline takes this idea one step further, exemplifying the interplay of doing and knowing, demonstrating how learners are able to construct their knowledge with the correct guidance, advice and help from their peers. This is all dependent on learners being provided with a suitable and appropriate opportunity that can entice such meaningful learning. Storyline is the body that provides this chance.

All utterances by the interviewer, Bruce Lander are referred to as BL, whereas all those made by the interviewee (Professor Steve Bell) are referred to as SB.

*BL: Thank you very much Professor Bell for your time today, it's very good to meet you, to put a voice to all the pictures I have seen on your website. What an extensive website that is.*

*SB: Well yes, I'm very fortunate in having a son, who's my webmaster.*

*BL : I particularly liked the little video which introduces the teacher and student autonomy concept.*

SB : The change in education from the formal to the more student centred approach.

*BL : From your website I can see you have a very international following.*

SB : Yes yes, we have people working on Storyline in Finland, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Germany and the States, mainly the West coast Oregon, California, but it's spreading to New York, Ohio.

*BL : I hear there are conferences too, based wholly on the STORYLINE idea.*

SB : Yes, there is actually a company called STORYLINE design, their website is [www.storyline.org](http://www.storyline.org) that's the American website, its organized by a company that is commercial. They have trademark for America, so any trainers working in America have to be trained by them. The interesting concept is, in Scotland it's been by osmosis, it's been a natural development there's been no trade marking of storyline here, or anything like that.

*BL : Could you briefly explain the idea behind STORYLINE ?*

SB : In 1965 we had a new curriculum plan for Scottish teachers in our primary schools. It was called the Scottish memorandum, the Primary memorandum at that time. It recommended that instead of all the separate subjects being different, 9 subjects were being taught at the time, that we should make learning more meaningful by grouping these in a cross-curricular way. Mathematics was still a basic skill, language in its different forms was also still a basic skill, both of which would be taught in a systematic way. Now teachers, as you can imagine, were a bit frightened by this as they were being urged to team-teach, something they were not used to.

*BL : By team-teaching you mean 2 or 3 teachers teaching the same subject but not necessarily in the same room ?*

SB : Yes. Teachers would cooperate with each other to teach in a cross curricular way, so that perhaps something was a visual in an art department but used by a language teacher, or an English teacher. To show the relevance, to show that very often the subject separation is an arbitrary one, that is decided on by teachers for teachers, not for the consumer, i. e. the student learner. So in 1965, the primary teachers had a big problem. I was very lucky because at that time I was a young lecturer of education at Jordanhill College of education. I was one of 3 people who were invited to form a small group. We were called staff tutors. The idea was that we would be free from working with students only to work with teachers in schools.

*BL : Ah, professional development ?*

SB : Yep, the 60's, late 60's, 67', was when I started. What we did was look at activity based methods as they were being used successfully in the first 3 years of primary. Until the new curriculum had been introduced the normal practice had been textbooks. So History books, page 52, read chapter ~, answer the questions, Geography, Science, Maths whatever, it was all the same. There was little thought given to the ways of teaching in the 60's. It was assumed that the most valuable concept was the content of books. As long as books were completed the goal had been reached.

*BL : This is exactly what modern day education in Japan is like at most schools. Did you start the Storyline approach off in the general curriculum of primary schools ?*

SB : Yes, the primary school, so children, aged between 5 ~ 11 years.

We looked at the activity methods of learning. Teachers of Primary 1 and 2, children aged 5~7, and found that teachers of that age group manage everything through activities. The teachers are responsible for visualization, for communication through drawings, for movement for showing mathematics through games and solid materials. In other words working with blocks, so children are getting numbers, shape, volumes and everything students at that age group learn was not confined to one sole subject. So students at that level are actively engaged in learning processes of the informal variety which gradually becomes more formal the higher up the scale they progress, after they have learnt to read and write.

What we saw was that there were opportunities for taking many of the ideas and extending them to older children. However, this probably took about 10 years of empirical research. There were things that we dropped and improved, gradually things developed. In the 70's and 80's things were really blossoming, and we found that other countries became very interested and it was adapted in a whole variety of ways. We found that our courses were adapted in other countries, Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Singapore. After giving workshops at conferences, representatives from other countries would take the idea and put it into practice in their schools. They would adopt the advice we were giving them as a model and then adapt it.

We made mistakes. We became the publishers of topics. We were providing fish rather than teaching '*how to fish*'. This had a knock on effect later as some teachers became very dependent on the production of materials, not particularly autonomous and that wasn't the idea. This was meant to be a process of learning, whereby any teacher could use our products for teaching anything they wanted.

*BL : Like the lifelong learning idea ?*

SB : That’s right. There were certain observations we made. We were helped immensely by researchers. The college of education system at that time would not give rewards for research or for writing papers. Time was supposed to be filled with programmes of course learning and course design for teachers. There was no reward for the teacher other than practical elements for teaching that we could provide. The Storyline approach provided this.

The people who were working this in other countries could see all sorts of possibilities academically and in research terms. In Denmark for example, they were very much into Vygotsky’s constructivism. Instead of the child being an empty sack or bottle waiting to be filled with knowledge by the teacher like “*the mug and jug*” theory (Rogers, 1983) with storyline, the student plays a more active role in the learning process. In Denmark they believed, like Vygotsky that the role of the teacher and student could be shifted. The teacher with enough collaboration with their students should facilitate meaning construction in students.

With modern day Storyline we have students in class who are bombarded with information and who have access to a detail of facts on the internet, like Wikipedia and so forth. We’ve had to move from a fact based content led curriculum to a skills based curriculum. Key questions were an optimal part of Storyline when it first started.

*BL : Could you give us an example of such a question ?*

SB : Sure. In primary 5 and 6, (10~12 years) pupils are supposed to study Europe. I would start a topic in Storyline by creating families, who are going to travel in Europe. This particular project is called “Capital Tours”. The idea is that



each group will be a family. The story starts with the simple key question of “*who would you like to be in the family?*” Students at this point, in groups of 4 or 5, create a family and discuss who they would like to be in it. They must choose a character by negotiating with each other the design of the family. Families are one of these things we have problems with because there are so many different kinds of family now and we’ve got to be careful not to generalize in any sense. One teacher that I worked with got into a lot of trouble recently for asking her students to bring in photos of family members, Granny, Granddad etc, in the prospect of making a family tree, but it all went wild. Children could not fulfil that request without harassment.

One of the strengths of storyline is that it is “*the student’s story*”. The teacher stands back and facilitates in the learning process. It is a paradox in a way, the teacher knows everything that the students are going to do in the story, but it’s ultimately the students who make the story. Learning in storyline is in the process of the story, not the product of the story itself.

*BL: I see, hence the word “storyline”.*

*SB: That’s right, the line is the teachers and the story is the student’s.*

*BL: So Storyline is a very interactive approach to learning, or inter-dependence basically.*

*SB: Absolutely.*

This is what is exciting for the teacher because the teacher will never have the same family twice, in the classroom. The children have created this imaginary family that lives, in this case, in Scotland. I have a structure where I want a name and date of birth, or a simple biography for all members of their imaginary family.

This is all discussed as you can have birthdays of the fictitious characters while the project is running. Everything is discussed in detail, from telephone numbers, family relations, hobbies and interests to personality traits. I ask for 2 or 3 adjectives describing personality for each character. This all creates a lot of opportunities later.

What happens next in this particular project is the teacher advises all groups that their family has *“won a 2 week free holiday to three European destinations of their choice”*. This fosters more opportunity for learning. Students begin to discuss the capital cities of Europe and how much they know. What is really happening in such instances is that the students are being put through a test, constructivism in action. What I’m really asking students is the indirect question *“what do you know?”*. I’m taking prior knowledge of what each student does or doesn’t know and am proposing that they learn more. Students are communally learning from each other, rather like Vygotsky’s theory, Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1993).

I give groups a large sheet of coloured paper and each group makes their conceptual model, from existing knowledge, of Europe. Usually within 20 minutes one group will ask, *“please please can we have a map of Europe?”* now that is music to a teacher’s ears, *“Yes, absolutely”* and not only that, but they now go to a map from the computer as all the maps in the schools are outdated. We now have a computer print out, which they are desperate to see and are viewing this map with what I call *“educated eyes”*. This process started with a simple question, has created a hypothesis and now in groups students are testing their hypothesis.

Students will complete their map of Europe in a team which is a valuable group learning process. I use this as an example of the principal outline of storyline.

1. Starts with a key question—what do you think ?
2. Hypothesis—testing your hypotheses
3. Ongoing learning with further key questions.

*“Now you know the capital cities in Europe, where would you like to go and why?”*

As soon as the why bit comes, we then move onto another key question. Further information is gathered in a communal way as students visualize their trip.

*“why are you going to this place ? How will you get there? What will you do ?”*

These are all a list of key questions in the sequence of storyline.

All this leads to further questions to parties out with the group, in gathering information. For example, members of each group may ask parents at home what their family does when they go on holiday ? This is all entirely creative and self-induced learning. This activity develops amazing group ethics and leadership skills as each member is given the role of finding out alternative information for the group. Storyline invites communication with a huge range of sources, elders at home, the internet, books, and brochures where this information can be found which induces more learning.

After the stage has been set and the trip planned, we then introduce the idea of incidents. The possibilities here are endless.

*BL : So you mean troubles that may occur along the way ?*

*SB : Yes, exactly. We suggest that there should be at least 2 types of incident along the way, happy and sad. The word ‘incident’ tends to have negative*

connotations, like accidents, or death but we want happy incidents too like, meeting people, falling in love in Rome for example. You never know what you're going to get. We list these in a set format of recorded incidents. There is a set matrix that I use for this. Within this matrix I list ways of telling which incident would make a good interview or newspaper report, a good idea for a role-play, a letter or postcard home. Any one of these incidents can be happy or sad.

As a teacher, there are several avenues we could explore for further development. This is all completely autonomous, students are suggesting what they're going to write about. The teacher may suggest keeping a diary of the trip by recording events encountered from each incident. There is always a high point in the Storyline process, a culminating event. In most cases in a primary school, this is the opportunity to share all of this work with the parents giving students an opportunity to present all their work in a very convincing manner. Teachers can make a resume or portfolio of every subject covered in the process of each Storyline.

*BL: I see, so there's a broad spectrum of learning areas covered here, not just a simple discussion.*

SB: I can use Storyline to talk about time, speed and distance, focus on modes of travel, calculate relative costs, discussing about world currencies that would involve mathematics and geography. So yes, Storyline does cover a broad spectrum of subjects.

In storyline the teachers start with what the learners know by asking key questions. Key questions are open questions that require creative and imaginative thinking, so they're positive questions in how many different ways, there's no right answer. Who would you like to be in the family? There's no right answer, however you must argue or justify your choice.

Storyline is very secure, it is preparing children for the real world. In the real world I would love to go on a holiday to Florida or the Caribbean, why don't I? I can't afford it, I have to think of my family. However in Storyline we can avoid such actual problems by creating this fictitious environment which is based on reality. Students would need to contemplate all the same problems they would encounter in reality, then research and discuss about them by asking questions. Each question would have a sequence that forms a chapter in the story. Learners in this sequence produce answers to each question in the form of conceptual models or hypothesis. They then test these by questioning and research.

A wide variety of techniques are used to explore and present their ideas, including visualization in two or three dimensions. Visualization is an incredible support. Have you heard about the work of Howard Gardner (1993) and his research on '*multiple intelligences*?' This is an incredible concept as in every class you will see an example of the kinds of intelligences he mentions. Some students in a group may not be good with numbers while others may be great. Gardner (1993) refers to this as '*multiple intelligences*'.

*BL: So what you're saying is we are all good at different things, which benefits the group as a whole?*

SB: Yes, that's right. In the old days, when I was at school, in the 60's it was reading and writing. There was no attempt at imaginative thinking or creating thinking in school then, they were seen to be unnecessary skills in education. Now more than ever though, these are the skills that we need. It's the referencing skills in modern day education that are of importance. There are so many sources that we can refer to obtain information with computers everywhere.

Storyline, from the learning perspective provides the very context in which students can hone their referencing skills and data collection from modern sources such as the internet. Storyline makes the practice of language exchange meaningful and easy in a way that suits them. In the process of data collection and research necessary for Storyline, the teacher can provide the support and advice they need to aid progress in attaining their goal. The teacher is a necessary catalyst in the process.

*BL : I don't want to appear critical here, but I can foresee several problems. This could be never ending.*

SB : Oh yes, it could, but you always have a culminating event that is the final objective ending the project. Storyline is like a novel. Everyone hates it if the story comes to an abrupt end. The story in storyline is the same, there has to be some kind of success. One example of this is an award ceremony, with, say one group being awarded the prize for “*best freight firm, or travel agent in Scotland*”. In the past we have had actual managers of companies, similar to one that has been simulated, come to give speeches. Something along those lines would be a ‘culminating event’. By creating such a goal early on gives incredible momentum and motivation to the learners involved.

*BL : What then, is the final objective of Storyline ?*

SB : In the case of primary classrooms, the classroom becomes the Storyline. There could be a model of objects, including any form of visuals or props mentioned throughout. There will inevitably be lots of writing material, maps and data obtained from the research. In effect the students are creating an original portfolio or textbook. As in all autonomy based projects, the learning is in the process, not the product.

*BL : Does Storyline not interfere with other ongoing projects in the school, perhaps with the history teacher or the art teacher? Does this not create animosity between the subjects and their teachers ?*

SB : Well, in the context we are working, there is no art teacher. Storyline was designed for primary education and branched out from there. There are curriculum guidelines which state that at some point along the process students are supposed to learn about the Second World War, at some point, the great revolution. All these elements can be integrated into the story of Storyline.

*BL : Another issue I can envisage with storyline is the assessment aspect. How do you evaluate the students here and provide the system with numbers ?*

SB : Yes yes, I thought you would ask about that sooner or later. All assessment in Storyline is ongoing. A portfolio of every project in each class is kept which helps teachers attain a final grade. This portfolio should include a draft of all work done in the process. Teachers have been closely observing the effort input of every individual from each group for some time which also helps. Another common aspect of Storyline is for the teacher to interview the students, with teachers asking each member to show them something they are proud of from their portfolio. Students would have to explain why they are proud of this item. The idea of criteria is important as we are trying here to build up autonomous evaluation in assessment. Conversely we'd ask students to provide a paper from their portfolio they are not happy with. Then we discuss how they could learn from it, improve on it. But yes, I know what you mean, the cultural system will never allow this.

SB : Teachers can provide evidence to the critics of this approach by producing a “*can-do*” list for each student. For example, student A can achieve construct A, B and C, however this tends to be more statement based and continuous assessment.

Assessment should be a process where we help students to get better, to identify problems and to see whether we can promote better teaching. Regardless, if you're a good teacher and you're working for the good of the students you would not need testing, numbers and figures to prove a student's capability. In fact what we would argue for Storyline and in what you're doing, you understand so much more about each individual from this interactive process. A test is simply measuring the ability to provide answers to questions, whereas with Storyline you can determine so much more, group skills, creativity, leadership, problem solving skills plus many more.

*BL : Is there a suggested format or guidelines to use for Storyline ?*

SB : Yes there is a suggested format, however it is not set in concrete. The line in the story, the plan must be maintained. The teacher should know the plan, but the students should not be aware of this or know what is coming next. The element of surprise is a marvellous motivator. The guidelines in Storyline are for the teacher's purpose only. This motivates the students creating excitement towards the next step.

Storyline is not just about knowledge and skills, it's also about feelings and attitudes. When we were working in Thailand last year we were doing a topic called “*river village*”. This was really a topic about pollution, on the precept of a community of people living by the river. The river is the basis of life for people from this village, they use it as a major route of transport, a market place, as drinking water, to wash in etc, the river is life to these people. One day someone from the village returns from the river claiming that all the fish are dead. The difference between this and an objective study is immense. For example a study based entirely on pollution in Thailand, would be something completely different. I am not saying that style is wrong, however Storyline looks at issues from a wider



perspective, about the feelings and attitudes of those affected.

*BL: So there is no textbook that Storyline uses? No template that students would follow?*

SB: No, no and we wouldn't consider that. Nonetheless what we ascertain in Storyline is that you must include these three elements: people, time and a setting all inclusive of incidents of course, good or bad, as previously mentioned.

For several years now I have been working with a group in Germany who are using Storyline in their EFL classes. The simple outline they have incorporated involves a bus-stop. The teacher provides a visual of a bus-stop and each student presents an image of a person, someone waiting at the bus-stop. This continues for a whole term, with students supporting details of personalities, professions, appearance and personal circumstances for each and every character they have created. As far as I'm aware, this is only being used in EFL oral classes at present.

One particular contact I have is with a teacher trainer in Freiburg, Germany who uses Storyline as a medium to train her future teachers. She claims that Storyline is better than other lines of teaching methodology because it provides a huge variety of learning opportunities and is not confined to the barriers of a textbook as in a regular class. She claims that:

*“Language learners are not interested in learning irregular verbs or other isolated language patterns. Like any other person, most language learners are interested in stories and attractive topics. With Storyline, learners talk about the topic in the target language, learning from each other in the process. My research shows that students improve not only their language competency, but also many other necessary skills which arise as each story progresses.*

*Students find this way of learning very motivating. Storyline is an integrative concept and apart from that, gives every child a chance to participate even in very heterogeneous classes."*

*BL : I see, so the possibilities for EFL class are endless.*

SB : Yes, really.

*BL : So as a teacher the job involved in Storyline is to give advice where needed, to guide students into how to improve their stories and to provide key questions at the appropriate times.*

SB : Yes, that's right. Storyline works best in small groups of 5 or 6. Working in groups positively adds to the competitive edge too of the process. Students devise solutions to problems which have arisen in effect each group motivates each other. Something I like very much about Storyline is that it helps teachers who feel anxious about too much chaos in the classroom to develop new skills and give their pupils more freedom. Not only language learners, but also their teachers learn from Storyline. Learners of course do not only develop and improve many language skills, but also various learning strategies which leads to more autonomy.

*BL : Is Storyline acknowledged by the schooling bodies as an appropriate addition to the curriculum ?*

SB : It is now in Scotland. In Glasgow several schools have been making DVDs of Storyline topics for a number of years now. Each DVD would have eight topics, perhaps geography in the UK, history or social issues. I remember one topic was based around a re-enactment of a family living in inner city Glasgow during the early 1940's, wartime.

*BL : What current research is happening concerning Storyline ?*

SB : There are several post graduate students using the Storyline approach all over the world, in Denmark, Germany, Holland, Greece and as far away as Singapore and Thailand. Also we have just published a book titled “Storyline, past present and future” , based on research in the field over the past few years.

*BL : Well, thank you very much for your help and time today, best of luck and if you are looking for a missing link to Japan you need look no further.*

SB : Thank you Bruce, I will be in touch. Let me end our talk today with a wonderful Chinese proverb.

**“Tell me, I forget.**

**Show me, I remember.**

**Involve me, I understand”.**

Isn't that great ?

Professor Steve Bell although now retired is still very active in the current work of Storyline. He will be the keynote speaker at the next biennial conference at the University of Iceland, in Reykjavik from August 9-12<sup>th</sup> 2012. This paper has been funded by a grant from Matsuyama University, Japan (2009).

See the Storyline websites below for more information.

Storyline Scotland—[www.storyline-scotland.com](http://www.storyline-scotland.com) click “what is Storyline ?” for video.

Storyline US—[www.storyline.org](http://www.storyline.org)

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