

## Story

**The following story was emailed to us recently.** At first it may seem just like a funny story, but if you read between the lines, it raises several interesting questions. Can you spot them?

An old Maori man lived alone at his family home out in Ruatoria. He wanted to dig his kumara garden, but it was very hard work. His only son, Hone, who used to help him, was in Paremoremo prison. The man wrote a letter to his son and described his predicament.

*Kia ora e Hone,  
I am feeling pretty bad because it looks like I won't be able to  
plant my kumara garden this year.  
I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot.  
If you were here, all my troubles would be over.  
I know you would dig the plot for me.  
Aroha nui  
Papa*

A few days later he received a letter from his son.

*E Pa,  
For God's sake! Don't dig up that garden, that's where I buried the BODIES.  
Love  
Hone*

At 4am the next morning, Gisborne C.I.B and the local police showed up with a search warrant and dug up the entire area without finding any bodies. They apologized to the old man and left. That same day the man received another letter from his son.

*E Pa,  
Go ahead and plant the Kumara.  
That's the best I could do under the circumstances.  
Love  
Hone*

When we received this story we were thrilled and used it immediately. It has so much potential for the classroom; you could use it to investigate the power of language and its uses, to look at motive, to understand character, or reactions (human or chemical). Think about how powerful this story would be as a starter in a lesson.

Beyond this, stories can illustrate something facts cannot and help us to create meaning by way of connection:

“Narrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend on it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of

Extract from *The Exam Class Toolkit: How to Create Engaging Lesson That Ensure Progression and Results* (Continuum)

predicting, of planning, and of explaining... Most of our experience, our knowledge and our thinking is organised as stories” [\[iv\]](#)

For our students, story is a vital part of their cultural lives. Television, music and video games are all structured around story. Using stories in teaching provides us with the potential to explore not only conceptual understanding, but also focus students on skills such as analysis, evaluation and synthesis. [\[v\]](#)

### **The Mini Saga**

Writing a story can give them this opportunity, but sometimes it is better to write less to achieve more – what about a complete story in 50 words... These are called mini-Sagas. Invented by science-fiction writer Brain Aldiss, these are very, very brief stories which still have the same construct as a standard story, that is, a beginning, middle and an end. There is a catch: each min-Saga must have exactly 50 words, excluding the title which can have fifteen. Here is an example:

#### **Beginning, Middle and End.**

It was lonely at the very beginning but suddenly, in one large blast, everything appeared. Things moved around, linked up, slid into place. That was when they met, migrated north and made new friends. They learned new languages. In the end, they couldn't cope living together so they fought. Forever.

Any idea which story it is?

The following story was written by one of our A-Level students after the end of a unit on Russian history:

#### **The Georgian**

Once upon a time there was a boy named Djugashvili. A quiet little chap who dreamt of heroic tales. Became religious, revolutionary, killed lots of soldiers. Then became rather famous. Killed lots of farmers, produced lots of tractors, maybe won WWII, built large wall, built many statues, killed lots. Died.

As you can imagine it requires great skill to be able to evaluate what needs to be included to make the min-Saga come alive: you have to analyse the relationships within and between individuals and events, as well as sequence of events, dialogues or other matters needed, to finally synthesise a whole topic area, and then fit it within the framework of the mini-Saga.

Mini-sagas are most successful if you stick to two basic ideas:

Keep them obvious

Keep them cryptic

Students can then read each others mini-Sagas or perhaps a selection which has been chosen by the teacher. We ask students to:

Guess who is involved

What the story might refer to e.g. a particular event, topic or theme etc.

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Evaluate what else could be included; perhaps something has been left out?

**Try writing some mini-Sagas in your subject to introduce a new topic or find a story that provides an interesting social commentary for something you are teaching.**

[iv] Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (OUP, 1996) p4.

[v] See Watkin and Ahrenfelt (2006) *op cit*, p16 and also

<http://www.educationforum.co.uk/HA/bloom.htm> for an interesting review and links.