

Dragons are everywhere in Venice - Stories, Myths, Legends and Fairy Tales as tools for reflection in teaching

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Abstract

Stories and storytelling are part of our cultural heritage and we have experimented if these experiences and memories in a learning and teaching activity can contribute to new understandings and new sense of community.

Stories connect people, while also contributing to the freedom of thinking. Referring to Walter Benjamin, the German literary critic and philosopher this paper reflects upon the stories, myths, legends and fairytales of Venice in relation to teaching and the use of storytelling as a tool in teaching. More specifically, it concerns an exploratory study with new and unique methods and interdisciplinary collaboration that focus on understanding cultural heritage through storytelling, including the freedom of thinking as an original teaching method to initiate creativity and imagination for the students in their works. The reflection is based on practical experiences during the CRAFT summer school during the Art Biennale 2019 in Venice.

Keywords: myths and storytelling, interdisciplinary learning and teaching

Legend has it that in the very depths of the Venice lagoon lived a mysterious dragon. A dragon that feared no man, except the gondolier. Just as the celebrated story of how Saint George, whose legend dates back to the 5th-century, vanquished a dragon and rescued a princess with a spear, the gondolier's oar was a permanent threat to the underwater dragon. Whilst the dragon might sometimes get angry - its breath causing the mists that envelopes the lagoon – it never rose to the surface because of the incessant to and fro of the gondoliers. Maybe it is still there?



Fig 1. Cort Widlowski/ C+W Studio

Walter Benjamin, the German literary critic and philosopher once said, ‘.. *experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn*’ ¹. Benjamin distinguished that there are two kinds of storytellers, the resident tiller of the soil and the trading seaman. Both are the origins of stories, which acquired materials from the experience far away, and from here and now. Benjamin notes that the distance in time and space accounts for the defamiliarization effect that comes from the experience. Like folklores and stories, when the original fairy tales are being

passed down from generation to generation, people are sharing their common memories and experiences, which their ancestors had as well.²

Most of us consider fairy tales to be stories for children, innocent, and without real evil or harm. The reality is that, while there are many empowering and positive messages in fairy tales, maybe they depict true relationships from the past. Therefore, when we delve into fairy tales and legends, we can discover both heroes and princesses from a different perspective. The endeavour is not useless, far from. Fairy tales and stories can yield useful lessons about life for us, especially when we learn to take a deeper look at the stories. In other words, stories accompany us through life from birth to death. But they do not merely entertain, inform, or distress us - they show us what counts as right or wrong and teach us who we are and who we can imagine being. Stories connect people.

This reflection concerns the exploratory ideas of a teaching event planned by CRAFT, an EU Strategic Partnership that explored themes of history, heritage and urban change of Venice at the 58. International Art Biennale in Venice. As part of the event, we told the students Venetian stories trying to teach how fairy tales address various socio-emotional challenges, which the students were confronted during their course, highlighting their imagination and creativity.

Having told these stories or fairy tales, we argue that the combination of simplicity of form and complexity of content makes the fairy tale a powerful tool for the perception of, and, reflection on emotions. The former renders openness to the text and context, a feeling of control for the student, thus allowing the student to relate to his or her own experiences. The latter offers substantial contributions to reflection on emotions. We consider this is shown on different levels of meaning: the artistic, the mythical and the ludic, each having specific cognitive and emotional functions. A situation that gives us a place for freedom of thinking and relaxing. At the event in Venice, we used fairy tales to teach students the freedom of thinking.

CRAFT is a project that explores cultural heritage, which is why Venice was the perfect context as a place where cultural heritage is found in a broad

spectrum. All-encompassing tangible, intangible, and natural heritage: the built environment, monuments, works of art, and artefacts born of human expression and creativity; the history, customs, traditions, and languages of several communities as an expression of their identities. Venice had contact with many countries and brought back cultural and religious traditions – St. George, the most famous dragon slayer along with St. Theodore. Scenes of the saints defeating the dragon are portrayed in mosaics, paintings, reliefs and sculpture many places in Venice. Some of the dragons are unusual looking, like a squishy crocodile, long-necked goose, or monster made up of head, legs, wings and tail from different animals.

St. Theodore, a 4th-century Roman soldier and champion of Christianity, was the first patron saint of Venice, even before St. Mark. According to legend, St. Theodore fought and vanquished a dragon, aided by the Christian cross. The statue of St. Theodore stands on top of the western column in the Piazzetta San Marco, and gazing at the figure of Saint Theodore and dragon up close, St. Theodore holds a shield with a cross in his right hand, a spear in his left hand. He confidently stands on top of an unhappy scaly dragon - resembling a crocodile.

Another patron saint of Venice, St. George is famous throughout Europe. In the middle Ages, Crusaders brought back the legend of St. George, who slays a dragon and saves a princess. In the legend, to appease a dragon threatening the kingdom, a maiden, the king's daughter, is offered. Just as the princess is about to be gobbled up by the dragon, Saint George rides by and vanquishes the dragon. The story is painted by the famous Italian Renaissance artist Carpaccio and is housed in the *Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni*. In the painting, St. George is portrayed while riding a horse above a wide background, his lance piercing the dragon's head.

The legend of Saint George the martyr –most famously told in the *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend), tells a tale of a Christian knight who, while out riding in the province of Lybia, arrived at the city of Sylene. Here the city's inhabitants were being terrorized by a terrible dragon, which they attempted to appease by providing two sheep every day. When the

inhabitants ran out of sheep, they substituted a human victim, who was selected by lot. On the day of Saint George's arrival, the king's daughter had been selected to serve as the sacrifice. Saint George ultimately rescued the princess, but before he would slay the dragon, the saint elicited the people's promise to convert to Christianity. This they promised, and once the dragon was killed, four ox carts were needed to dispose of its carcass.³

But let us go back to the teaching issue. In our teaching, we have often experienced that students especially find the notion of atmosphere and human emotions rather difficult to quantify and describe, as well as to start analysing, evaluating and applying when developing new creative conceptual ideas or solutions. Students in design classes often struggle to comprehend the complexity of being creative. They do not know how to, on the one hand, capture, document and understand memory and emotion, and on the other hand, use that information to spark imagination and creativity when developing their own design concepts or solutions. As an attempt to overcome this complex challenge, we have tried throughout the past 6 years at Aalborg University to introduce some new design aesthetic tools, drawing on a narrative approach inspired by the concept of storytelling⁴. The approach introduces the students first to classical design- and architectural history and then a series of design ethnographic tactics – like persona, scenario writing and storyboarding^{5 6} - to help them research, document, analyse and understand existing contextual, societal and technical problems within each their domains. However, more importantly as key visual tools to help them capture elements of memory and emotions, as well as spark imagination and creativity and thereby develop innovative conceptual design solutions. Based on these former experiences, we used storytelling as a tool during the CRAFT workshop in Venice, and included several stories, myths, legends and fairytales that provided the students with yet another level of creativity to their learning process. We found that the concept of storytelling, with stories, myths, legends and fairy tales had a great potential and was useful tools to introduce in teaching.

Oh, did we mention the Church of Santa Maria e San Donato? It is a religious edifice located in Murano, here, you find large bones behind the altar said to be the bones of a dragon slain by another Saint.⁷ Yes, it is true, behind the altar there are four rib bones, hanging from wires, the bones are each more than 1 meter long. According to legend, these are bones of the dragon slain by St. Donatus in Greece.

So, be aware. Dragons are everywhere in Venice. And stories, myths, legends and fairy tales are waiting to be turned to tools for teaching.

NOTES

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (London: Fontana, 1969), 84.

² Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*.

³ Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater, *Butler's Lives of the Saints* (United Kingdom: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 148-50.

⁴ Tenna Doktor Olsen Tvedebrink, Anna Marie Fisker, Anna Eva Utke Heilmann and Nini Camila Bagger, "Tales of Past Tables: Karen Blixen's Storytelling as a Foundation for a New Narrative Design Tool", in *Back to the Future: The Future in the Past: ICDHS 10th+I Barcelona*, Conference Proceedings Book, (Barcelona: Barcelona University Press, 2018), 554-558.

⁵ Tvedebrink et al., "Tales of Past Tables".

⁶ Lene Nielsen, *From User to Character – An Investigation into User-descriptions in Scenarios* (The HCI research group, Department of Informatics working paper-series, 2002).

⁷ Ökumenisches Heiligenlexikon, "Donatus von Arezzo", accessed May 28, 2020, http://www.heiligenlexikon.de/BiographienD/Donatus_von_Arezzo.html.

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