

# This Is Our World: Arendt's Notion of Storytelling and Its Place in Education

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Arendt's rich notion of storytelling weaves itself throughout her work. It highlights the fundamental role that stories play in our experience, by connecting us to the past and illuminating the complexity of human relationships. Stories thus draw us into a common world we all share. While Arendt is keen to emphasize the importance of storytelling, she never explicitly discusses it in the context of schooling, for her work on education is limited. And while educational scholars have maintained a keen interest in Arendt's thinking, there seems to be little in the way of sustained attention on this particular aspect of her thought. But to the extent that Arendt's conception of education entails preparing students "for the task of renewing a common world," and to the extent that she thinks stories are a primary means of introducing us to that common world, we should take seriously the role of storytelling in education.<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT STORIES CAN DO

Arendt thinks we human beings are active, engaging in one of three modes of activity: labor, whereby we produce short-lived, consumable objects, focused on our biological survival; work, whereby we make durable objects that allow our lives to unfold; and action, whereby we freely bring something new into the world by means of speech and deed. Action is the most fleeting of these activities, destined to be forgotten as soon as it happens, but storytelling is a means of capturing and preserving it. Though speech and deed "can never outlast the moment of their realization [and] would never leave any trace without remembrance," they lend themselves to storytelling, because they are "the two activities whose end result will always be a *story* with enough coherence to be told."<sup>2</sup> Action is in need of preservation because it is the highest form of human activity, what Arendt calls "the political

activity par excellence.”<sup>3</sup> Storytelling is therefore a means of conserving the best of what we do, the distinctive expression of what makes us human.

Despite the deep connection between our actions and the storytelling they can inspire, we cannot tell our own stories as we are living them. Insofar as stories reveal who we are, insofar as they make sense of the words and deeds of our lives, Arendt thinks they can only be told retrospectively, because “what the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences.”<sup>4</sup> This suggests that we need storytellers, to help tell the stories of our lives and to help make sense of who we are, both as individuals and as peoples. If it is only stories that can fully express our distinctive character, by capturing what we say and do, then it is only storytellers that have the ability, and perhaps the responsibility, to preserve the character of individuals and peoples for generations to come.

At first glance, this idea appears to undermine our capacity for narrative agency. If spectatorial storytellers are better placed than us to tell the stories of our own lives, then we would have trouble conceiving of our chosen actions as part of a larger story. We would find it difficult to live with a sense of narrative unity.<sup>5</sup> But recall Arendt’s suggestion that the full meaning of what we say and do is hidden *while* we are “in the act or caught in its consequences.” This need not prevent us from being able to reflect in a narrative mode, at least after the immediate consequences of our action have passed. That the spectator has a privileged view does not suggest that we are incapable of telling our stories. Rather it suggests that telling our own stories should not be a solitary activity. We need other storytellers to help give shape to our narratives.

While Arendt never explicitly defines what she means by stories, she says that they may be “told and retold and worked into *all* kinds of material.”<sup>6</sup> But to the extent that stories can most faithfully capture speech and deed, Arendt seems to esteem three particular forms of storytelling about human affairs: history, literature, and theater. She sees history as a narrative of human events, literature as an acute description of human predica-

ments, and theater as the artistic expression of the political sphere of human life.<sup>7</sup> Although there is no guarantee that each of these modes of storytelling can accurately capture and convey human action, they each have the potential to preserve the past as well as disclose the meaning of what we say and do.

This disclosed meaning is not some proposition that can be extracted from a story, nor some neat ‘moral’ to which a story can be reduced. As Arendt notes, “storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it . . . it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are.”<sup>8</sup> This meaning cannot be explicitly defined, otherwise it would be obscured. Instead it is revealed, in part, by being reconciled with things as they really are. We need not take this phrase “things as they really are” too literally; stories do not have to be factually accurate to reveal meaning. In being *reconciled* with things as they really are, stories reflect the verisimilitude of human experience. As such, they contribute to an understanding of the human condition by making sense of human action.

In making sense of what humans say and do, stories do not necessarily reveal some definitive account of the complexity of human affairs. Rather they simply render such complexity intelligible. They do this by not only revealing human action but also illuminating what Arendt calls the “‘web’ of human relationships.”<sup>9</sup> Actions happen between people, and out of this space in-between arise their interests. An *inter-est* (literally what lies between) relates people to each other and connects them, and interests between many people tie them together in a web of relationships. Though they are intangible, interests form the background for all human action. As Arendt observes, “most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality [some interest] in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent.”<sup>10</sup> Stories have the capacity to capture both our action and what lies between us, thus revealing our distinctive character and illuminating the complex reality of human relations.

## THE FACULTY OF DEPTH

Arendt thinks that the essence of educational activity is conservation: to cherish and protect the child against the world and the world against the child.<sup>11</sup> Teachers need to shield the world against what Arendt calls “the fact of natality, through which the human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be foreseen by those who are already there and who are going to leave in a short while.”<sup>12</sup> In order to protect the world against this potentially destructive change, and against the mortality of those “who are going to leave in a short while,” teachers must introduce students to the world in such a way that the best of it may be kept alive and renewed. One of the ways they can prepare students for this task of renewal is by telling the world’s stories.

Since the world is necessarily older than students, Arendt thinks learning about it inevitably means learning about its history.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that students cannot renew the world without being exposed to stories about its past. The world has a history which informs our ways of life. While each successive generation of students will renew those ways of life, making their own distinctive mark, they always do so against the backdrop of what has come before. Students may feel pride about their ancestors’ achievements and shame about their moral failings, and these feelings help shape their standards and aspirations. But students can only have these feelings if they know the stories of our collective past. Without such stories, they can have no connection to history, and without such a connection, the world cannot be renewed.

Stories about the past can do more than provide students with the material required to renew the world. They can also help to promote what Arendt calls “the dimension of depth in human existence [because] depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance.”<sup>14</sup> For Arendt, memory is the faculty of depth.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, the weight of the phrase “dimension of depth in human existence” suggests that such having such depth is desirable, something to which we should aspire. On the other hand, it suggests that reaching such a depth may only be available to those

with sufficient experience of human existence. So seeking this depth in the classroom might seem like an inevitably fruitless task. But depth is surely a matter of degree. Even if some stories of the past are not relatable to certain students, they will always offer the opportunity to achieve at least some measure of depth. These stories can also be thought of as exercises in the art of remembrance, cultivating the faculty of depth so that it can be exercised more fully in the future.

In addition to helping us develop the capacity for remembrance, stories of the past have the potential to teach us about human greatness. Arendt tells us that the Greeks believed “history receives into its remembrance those who through deed and word have proved themselves . . . and their everlasting fame means that they, despite their mortality, may remain in the company of the things that last forever.”<sup>16</sup> Students who learn about such deeds and words are made aware of what it takes to be remembered, of what it means to be great. Arendt notes that the Romans were even more deferential to the past than the Greeks, in thinking of “the past *qua* past as a model, ancestors, in every instance, as guiding examples for their descendants; to believe that all greatness lies in what has been.”<sup>17</sup> In light of these two attitudes from antiquity, stories about the past can be used to suggest a measure of greatness. Students who study the past can ask, “Are we worthy of our ancestors?” They can use stories of the past to shape their own understanding of what constitutes greatness. Such stories can serve as both a measure and a model of worthy speech and deed.

The problem with only hearing stories of past glory is that students will be precluded from achieving the full depth of remembrance. To only tell stories of past greatness is to tell a one-sided story of a many-sided past. Arendt praises both Homer and Thucydides for their attempts to achieve historical objectivity by telling *multiple* sides of the same story: the former told stories about the conqueror and the conquered, while the latter was able to articulate the different points of view involved in a particular historical event.<sup>18</sup> When exposed to different historical viewpoints, students can develop a nuanced account of history, inspiring neither blind nostalgia nor blanket

disdain. Told together, these different stories can encourage an attitude to the past that is both respectful and critical. But students can only gain such critical awareness from a deep familiarity with a comprehensive collection of stories about the past.

Stories can also help students to cultivate an ethical relationship with the past.<sup>19</sup> Such a relationship involves seeing the past as making moral demands on us, encouraging us to acknowledge our responsibility to it. One way this can be achieved is to have students be exposed to first-person narratives, which uniquely animate the story being told. The goal here is not to have students try to imagine exactly what a given person was feeling, but rather to have them acknowledge their responsibility to that person, as a fellow human being, and to the past itself.

It is easy for students to think that history is a collection of stories about individuals who shaped the past through their actions alone. But, like any story, a story of the past has the capacity to reveal human complexity. As Arendt astutely notes, “we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the ‘hero’ of the story, we can never point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome.”<sup>20</sup> This is because a story and its actions are enacted among human beings, in a social context, in the midst of a web of human relations. The more a historical story is attuned to these complexities, the better chance students will have of appreciating the depth and richness of the past.

Not only do stories of the past forge some common ground between us and our ancestors, they also provide common ground for those of us who share such stories in the present. According to Arendt, we are connected to each other in the context of what she calls a public world. This world is made up of enduring human objects, both physical and intangible, including stories of the past. Such stories provide a means for us to come together as human beings, by sharing in a common world. They also provide the means for students to inherit this world when they enter public life. They can give students common frames of reference which will allow

them to share as equals (at least in this respect) in the common world. Stories of the past therefore allow students to be connected both to their ancestors and to their future peers in the public sphere.

### A SPIRIT OF VITALITY

If telling stories about the past exercises our faculty of depth, then the act of storytelling itself can be said to exercise the faculty of imagination. Arendt says that while memory is the faculty of making present the past, and divination is the faculty of making present the future, “imagination does not need to be led by this temporal association; it can make present at will whatever it chooses.”<sup>21</sup> Despite making the distinction between memory and imagination as faculties, Arendt does not mean to suggest that memory has a monopoly on history while the imagination can only deal in fiction. In fact, Arendt says that “the [only] distinction between a real and fictional story is precisely that the latter was ‘made up’ and the former not made at all.”<sup>22</sup> Telling any kind of story, whether of past reality or atemporal fiction, requires making present what is absent, which requires the imagination.

While the faculty of depth connects us to our ancestors and, subsequently, to our common world, the faculty of imagination makes us fully alive. Arendt says that “without repeating life in imagination you can never be fully alive, ‘lack of imagination’ prevents people from ‘existing.’”<sup>23</sup> This is not to suggest that you cannot live fully unless you tell stories. Rather it is to suggest that the act of storytelling—the act of repeating life in the imagination—is a “part of living.”<sup>24</sup> Just as a sense of depth is achieved through memory, a sense of vitality is achieved through imagination.

We might take the phrase “repetition of life in the imagination” to mean that those who tell stories should be faithful to life rather than create fiction. Indeed, Arendt understands writers of fiction as adhering to the following principle: “Be loyal to life, don’t create fiction but accept what life is giving you, show yourself worthy of whatever it may be by recollecting and pondering over it, thus repeating it in imagination; this is the way to remain alive.”<sup>25</sup> But far from being a prohibition against poetic license, or a

decree that stories must be autobiographical, this passage implies that all stories, fiction or otherwise, should remain true to the experience of life. They should, as Hamlet says, hold the mirror up to nature. While fictional stories may be imaginatively elaborate and remote from our immediate experiences, Arendt is suggesting that such stories will only resonate with their audience if they capture something authentic about the human experience. Those who write and tell stories can only achieve this authenticity by repeating life in their imagination.

If Arendt is right about the connection between telling stories and being fully alive, then it is worth considering whether students should be given the opportunity to tell their own stories. The primary purpose of such an exercise would not be to produce creative writers, nor would it be to cultivate creativity (though that might be a pleasant side-effect). The central aim here is to give students the chance to repeat life in the imagination. The content of their stories is of secondary concern. Similarly, the mode of storytelling is of no particular importance beyond teaching students about matters of form. Whether students tell their stories through prose, poetry, or even drama, what matters is the fact that they are given the opportunity to repeat life in their imagination and, therefore, to be alive.

Although the specific form and content of students' stories should not be a primary concern, the quality of the storytelling should not be overlooked. What is at stake here is not so much the quality of the final result, the story in finished form, but rather the quality of the process itself. Not only can students feel alive when repeating life in the imagination, they can also develop the capacity for patience. As Arendt observes: "only if you can imagine what has happened anyhow, repeat it in imagination will you see the stories, and only if you have the patience to tell and retell them . . . will you be able to tell them well."<sup>26</sup> Given that it takes patience to appreciate the complexities of the public realm, students should be given ample opportunity to cultivate this virtue before entering public life. While storytelling is obviously not the only activity that encourages patience, the fact that it can do so while also making students feel alive suggests that it could play a significant



role in a student's learning experience.

### A SENSE OF POSSIBILITY

As we have seen so far, storytelling has two fundamental capacities: preserving the past and illuminating the complexity of human affairs. When these two capacities are appropriately combined, they yield a third capacity: suggesting possibilities for future action. Though we can be inspired to act by looking to models from the past, we can only emulate these models at best. We cannot completely imitate them because of the inevitable uniqueness of our particular web of human relationships. But when we combine our knowledge of the past with a general human understanding (whether it takes the form of empathy, insight, or both), we can *see* future possibilities. Stories play a fundamental role in expanding our horizons and giving us a sense of what may be possible.

Stories of the past are of particular importance with respect to preparing for the task of renewing the world. Students will always be able to change the world accidentally, of course, but without a deep knowledge of the past they will not be able to change it meaningfully.<sup>27</sup> Stories of the past do more than just provide fodder for critique. They can give students an opportunity to develop an informing relation with the past, giving them a standpoint not provided by the present. These stories can also enable students to make comparisons, by asking, "How are we faring in relation to our ancestors? In what ways are we falling short? How can we do better?" Without stories of the past, students will lack the necessary perspective to conduct an honest self-appraisal. And without an authentic assessment of current circumstances, they will have a diminished capacity to renew the world in the future.

To what extent, though, should stories in school be used to provide a future-looking orientation? On a conservative reading of Arendt, it would seem that only stories of the past should be told in school. This is because the school is responsible for protecting "what is new and revolutionary in every child,"<sup>28</sup> which requires the creation of a stable environment

where children can be children and the influences of political (public) life are kept at bay. Stories which focus on the unknown, unpredictable future may undermine this environment's stability. The only appropriate stories for maintaining this environment are those of the fixed, unchangeable past. Given that the school is not responsible for directly creating active citizens, while students are still in school, educators have no need to tell stories about the future.<sup>29</sup> Their responsibility is to prepare students for active citizenship when they enter the public realm, and it can best fulfill this responsibility by telling stories of the past.

This conservative reading can be complicated, however, by considering what exactly Arendt means by “renewing” the common world. One sense of ‘renewal’ is ‘to continue’ or to ‘re-establish’ something from the past. Another sense is more literal: to re-new, to make new again. Arendt seems to mean the latter, when she talks about the world being “set right anew” and educating “in such a way that a setting-right” of the world is possible.<sup>30</sup> For a school to prepare students for active citizenship, it must therefore prepare them for setting the world right. This means that though stories told in school might not explicitly focus on the future, they must surely *inspire* the kind of future action required to set the world right anew. This means that such stories cannot help but raise possibilities for the future.

It can be difficult to know how to read Arendt's claim that “the function of the school is to teach children what the world is like and not to instruct them in the art of living.”<sup>31</sup> If the school's task is to prepare students for living in the public realm, then how could it not instruct students in the art of living? What Arendt means, it seems, is that the arts of living can only be exercised once students are out of school and in the public realm, and that the best way to prepare students for such a life is to teach them what the world is like. This requires telling stories about the world, in effect saying, “this is our world,” with all its defects and its possibilities.<sup>32</sup> Not only can these stories provide motivation, they can give students the historical understanding they need to imagine future possibilities of setting the world right.

## CONCLUSION

Given that students are not yet fully part of the public world, they need a sense of potential connection to that world if they are to eventually assume responsibility for it. This potential connection to the world, a connection which can fully bloom once students enter public life, takes the form of depth, vitality, and possibility. These human powers are inextricably linked and can be cultivated through storytelling. If students are to join us in the task of renewing our common world, then they must be appropriately prepared. Of course they need to be instructed in the skills required for labor and work, but if they are to engage in the highest form of human activity—acting with others in the world—then they need stories to orient them, to give them a shared reference, and to give them a sense of possibility that the world can and should be renewed.

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1 Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 193.

2 Hannah Arendt, “The Concept of History,” in *Between Past and Future*, 44; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Publication City: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 97 (emphasis added).

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.

4 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 192.

5 On the moral importance of embodying a narrative unity, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), particularly Chapter 15. MacIntyre also suggests that students themselves should be encouraged to start seeing people’s lives, including their own, as embodying narratives. See Alasdair MacIntyre and Joseph Dunne, “Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne,” *Journal*

of *Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 1 (2002): 1–19.

6 Lisa J. Disch writes that by stories, Arendt “means everything from the casual anecdotes told by friends over dinner or by parents to children, to novels and short stories, to the narratives and essays she herself wrote for *The New Yorker* and *Commentary*.” from “More Truth than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt,” *Political Theory* 21, no. 4 (1993): 668; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184 (emphasis added).

7 Arendt, “The Concept of History,” 44; “Preface,” in *Between Past and Future*, 6; *The Human Condition*, 188.

8 Hannah Arendt, “Isak Dinesen: 1885–1962,” in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 270–271.

9 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 183.

10 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182 (emphasis in the original).

11 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 192.

12 Arendt, “The Concept of History,” 61.

13 See Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 192.

14 Arendt, “What is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future*, 94.

15 I owe this formulation to Michael H. McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012), 50.

16 Arendt, “The Concept of History,” 48.

17 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 190.

18 See Arendt, “The Concept of History,” 51–52.

19 Ann Chinnery notes that there has been a fairly recent shift in history ed-

ucation, from teaching history as an objective story to “historical consciousness,” which encourages students to live in an ethical relation to the past.

See Ann Chinnery, “Caring for the Past: On the Relationality and Historical Consciousness,” *Ethics and Education* 8, no. 3 (2013): 252–262.

20 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 185.

21 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald I. Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 79.

22 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.

23 Arendt, “Isak Dinesen,” 263–264.

24 Arendt, “Isak Dinesen,” 264.

25 Arendt, “Isak Dinesen,” 264.

26 Arendt, “Isak Dinesen,” 263.

27 See Mordechai Gordon, “Hannah Arendt on Authority: Conservatism in Education Reconsidered,” in *Hannah Arendt & Education: Renewing Our Common World*, ed. Mordechai Gordon (Boulder, CO: Perseus Books, 2001), 50.

28 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 189.

29 In her reading of Arendt on education, Anya Topolski claims that “Children are human beings and cannot be reduced to their status as future citizens.” See Anya Topolski, “Creating Citizens in the Classroom,” *Ethical Perspectives* 15, no. 2 (2008): 259–282.

30 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 189.

31 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 192.

32 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 186.