A SUCCESS STORY CONFERENCE: WHAT, WHY AND HOW?

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Overview

A success story approach for sharing teaching strategies that teachers have implemented in their classrooms, the new techniques that they have devised and explored, and the teaching tips that they have experimented and found effective, is not often developed into a large-scale conference. This paper reports on the purpose, procedure and outcomes of a success story conference organized in Nepal. It presents the voices of 10 participants who attended the conference. It highlights how it turned out to become such a conference, never organized before, where the large majority of presenters became their colleagues who were sharing their successes happily, and where the audience were listening to their own fellow colleagues with some joy as well as expectation and had a lot of takeaways for immediate classrooms.

A brief history

The root of this conference goes back to a five-day Hornby Regional School which was organized in Kathmandu, Nepal in 2013. The trainers for this school were Richard Smith and Amol Padwad. In this school, the participants were asked to talk and write about successes that they had achieved in their classroom teaching and learning. This could involve strategies related to teaching a language skill or an aspect of a language, managing classrooms and the like. At first, the participants were invited to recall a story related to their success that was achieved in their classroom and share it informally in a small group. Later, they were asked to share the story in a different group of three. While sharing in this way, they added some more description to what they had shared earlier. They happily reflected on their own good moments which was in the form of a presentation. Finally, they were asked to share their story with a different partner (see Smith, Padwad & Bullock 2017). This final sharing was an extended form of the success story they had identified earlier. They brushed up their stories and made them more specific and comprehensible. It was indeed a unique training in terms of form and motive. Unique in the sense that all the participants were engaged in telling their own stories and learned from one another. Almost all the stories told were equally useful as they were based on their own teaching learning context. The facilitators were simply pushing them to share in a systematic and meaningful way, and they were also building a rationale for success stories by bringing in some principles and theoretical underpinnings of English language teaching. Smith (2017: 3-4) argues that this kind of training is 'an 'enhancement approach', setting out to look for positives to build on from within the experiences and from the perspectives of … teachers in such settings.' Such an approach creates a platform for learning by building on the teachers' successful experiences and their perspectives on their successes, and encourages other colleagues to try out successful strategies they have learnt through sharing in their own setting. As I was one of the participants of this workshop, I personally realized the objective and motive of sharing successes, and how successes could be multiplied in a wider community of practitioners.

Having become aware of its significance, we tested this strategy in two teacher training workshops of Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA), attended by more than 35 participants, where teachers share their success stories related to their own classroom teaching and learning. At first, there was a feeling that the teachers came up with an expectation that the trainer would offer them classroom teaching tips, as used to happen in a regular training. However, they gradually realized that they were learning from their fellow colleagues, and eventually, the participants stated that this training was their first experience to realize how they could learn from each other by acknowledging their own efforts and successes. This is exactly what had happened in the Hornby Regional School as well. Of course, in those trainings which we delivered in Nepal, we also talked about some rationales that could back up their successes. For this, we linked what they had shared as success stories to some general principles and approaches of language teaching and learning.

Later, we found that this approach had to be extended further, as sharing success stories had the power to bring changes to the classroom. Nearly a year later, we proposed a special session 'NELTA ELT Clinic' for the 23rd NELTA

International Conference. This clinic turned out to be another encouraging experience, as a large number of teachers (around 50) attended, talked about their successes and explored the solutions for their problems from one another. In this conference, we also asked them to state their problems at the very beginning, and identify which success stories their friends shared with them could address their problems, puzzles and concerns that they had shared with us earlier (for details, read Dewan, 2016).

As the approach became effective in different respects, in 2018, we thought about giving it the shape of a large gathering, a conference where more than 200 teachers would participate from many parts of Nepal and share their success stories related to their classroom teaching and learning. We named this the '1st Success Story Conference of Teachers 2018' and organized it at the Learning Realm International (LRI) School, Nepal in August. We announced a call for papers and asked teachers specifically to mention their own success stories related to teaching and learning. Of course, it required some time for us to clarify what potential teacher presenters could write and how they could share. However, ultimately, we received more than 20 papers in different areas, such as classroom research, teaching and learning strategies, activity-based learning, use of technology in classroom and so on, and we organized it as a one-day conference, with significant engagement from teachers.

Smith (2018) in his initial words sent by him to the organizers and read at the inauguration in the conference stated: 'I developed this approach in my own teacher training practice over a number of years and introduced it … at a British Council Hornby Regional School in November 2013 in Kathmandu.' This reveals how this approach came about in the form of a conference, which has some roots back in Richard Smith's long teacher training practice.

First Success Story Conference
After the decision was made to organize the first success story conference of teachers, we started making a call for papers, having developed a specific rubric. We also clarified what the success story conference would be and what would be expected from it. To enable this event to gain a formal shape as a conference and to add some value to the event, we included a key speech and two different panels (with students, and the academic leader of the institution, parent and university teacher) related to conference theme and sub-themes. We invited a keynote speaker,

Professor Jai Raj Awasthi who talked about the successes of teachers in general. The crux of the conference, to encourage teachers to share their success stories, remained the core component in the event. The addition of three sessions equally helped bring everyone together and made them feel that they were part of a shared experience.

For the majority of teachers who were in the committee, it was the first experience of being involved in an organizing committee. This involved both challenges and benefits. The challenge was that we had to have frequent meetings, formal and informal, to track our progress and to clarify what we were doing. The benefit was that since most of them were having their first experience as organizers, they were more curious and sought to make the event successful by all means possible. Next, due to the formation of different committees, the responsibilities became shared; as a result, each one gained the opportunity to experience the role of managing the conference. The purpose of having different committees was also to enable them to gain confidence in organizing a series of success story conferences in the coming years. Five different committees were formed from organizing school such as registration management, publication management, session management, student rapporteurs management and IT support committees. This was to ensure that each committee could work independently, and at the same time, in consultation with the overall management committee.

For wider participation, information about the conference, with clear mention of its purpose, was disseminated through institutional website, social networking sites and emails. The printed letters were also dispatched to nearly 35 schools. To inform this novel model of sharing stories to other stakeholders who could potentially disseminate further, representatives from British Council, universities and other schools were also invited. The purpose of organizing the conference was briefly discussed in an inauguration session before the keynote speech.

Different success stories from the teachers were placed as parallel sessions, which were of 30 minutes duration. The presenters were given 20 minutes to present their stories, and the remaining 10 minutes at the end was for a question and answer session. Each session had a session chair to introduce the presenter and moderate the question and answer session. The committee ran a brief rehearsal a few days before the conference for the session chairs to make them familiar with the roles as they were new in the conference. The session

chair also provided certificates to the presenters at the end.

Conference Participants' Voices

Three months after the completion of the conference, some participants were sent some questions in online form; of these, with 10 participants answering. The participants who answered were 8 presenters and 2 participants. The questions asked to them were as follows:

1. What three things did you like about/in the 1st success story conference? While listing, also think about how the conference supported for your professional development.

2. To what extent did you find sharing success stories with colleagues in the first success story conference helpful? If helpful, why did you think so? Mention any two reasons.

3. What are the things that you did not like about/in the first success story conference? What do you think could be improved if the success story conference were organized again?

All those who responded to these questions mentioned that the success story conference became helpful for their professional development as they were able to learn from one another by sharing their own classroom successes with each other. They also stated that they could network with colleagues so that they could remain in a wider community of practitioners for future collaboration and support. More importantly, they gained context-sensitive classroom teaching tips and strategies which they could immediately apply in their classes. The participants' responses are organized under four different broader themes below.

1. Successes, not failures

We hardly get the chance to talk about our successes in a large gathering. And especially in South Asian region, if anyone, let alone a teacher, talks about successes in a big mass with the fellow colleagues, they might term him/her as a pompous person or a bragger. This seems to be common in most professional contexts. However, the truth is that the success achieved by a particular teacher in his/her classroom teaching and learning can turn out to become the effective strategy for other teachers. Smith (2018) states:

> There is not nearly enough celebration of teachers' successes, not nearly enough sharing of what they *can* do, often in the face of very

difficult circumstances – instead teachers are much too often *blamed,* or blame themselves for not doing well enough. Isn't it time we tried a more appropriate and constructive *enhancement approach*, getting away from deficit models? Of course teachers face many problems, but solutions to those problems don't come easily from the outside – teachers are the ones who know their classrooms, their students, their situations the best, and they need to be helped to have confidence in their own ability to develop appropriate methodology for themselves. Sharing success stories is a good foundation on which to build.

Smith argues that solutions to teachers' challenges or problems do not come easily from outside; rather their problems can be solved by sharing each other's own successful attempt, and having done so, it opposes the deficit model, which is based on 'preconceptions relating to relatively privileged kinds of classroom; which assumes that practices in small, well-resourced classrooms represent a kind of 'norm' that needs to be followed; and which can result in additional, inappropriate pressures and burdens on teachers.' (Smith et al., 2017, p.4). Sharing a success story model is an enhancement approach, which builds teachers' better understanding of the teaching learning situation from their own experiences. This approach is also very helpful in dealing with context sensitive issues, as Smith et al. (2017) hint when discussing the nature of the deficit model, which will be dealt under a separate theme below.

It was surprising to see how everyone in the conference was intent on listening to the successes of their colleagues and how they viewed their colleagues' successes as possible strategies to adopt in their own teaching and learning. Many participants viewed the success story conference as a platform whereby they could learn from one another, which is reflected in these statements:

> There are many things I liked about in the 1st Success Story conference among which the best was that it was a very good platform for all the educators to share their success stories and to know about others stories as well.

> It was good to share our success stories with the colleagues in the first Success Story conference not only we shared our stories and strategies that we applied but also learned about many other successful strategies which can be implemented with our students.

There was an equal focus on how teachers happened to learn many successful strategies which they can implement in their own classes.

Some of the participants mentioned how listening to each other's story became a really good moment. This event was intended to facilitate the sharing of successes, not failures. It could be that some of the successes were built to address their problems or puzzles, but they were again successes. One of the teachers mentioned that more than talking about successes, the participants needed to share the stories of hard times that they faced during their teaching period. As he stated:

> Sharing each other's success stories is always beneficial. Not only success stories, the teacher should also share the stories of hard time that they face during the teaching career.

To me if teachers talk about the hardships they have undergone at some point of time in their career, ultimately they will be better able to develop strategies for coping with such hardships. This will be another motivating and inspiring story to make teachers feel better in their own profession, and equally, learn skills to tackle such unforeseen circumstances that might come in their career.

In the conference, both presenters and participants were excited about sharing and listening to their achievements related to teaching and learning. As one of the participants mentioned:

> Listening to one anothers' teaching stories was one of life's wonderful moment…Got an opportunity to listen to my Guru Prof. Dr. Jai Raj Awasthi that reminded me of the time when I used to be his student in the department and Bal Ram Adhikari sir's story was wonderful too including others.

The audience was curious to see on what respect one got for successes, and how the audience could transfer those achievements in their own classrooms. The presenters were sharing what the success story was (let's suppose strategy to teach drama), how one achieved it (how he or she used the strategy) and how he or she could equate it as a success story (how about learners' engagement or impact of the strategy in teaching and learning).

2. Talking about context-sensitive strategies
The successes, which were indeed teaching learning strategies that were shared were context-sensitive for the person sharing was not someone alien, nor the expert hired to train them, but he/she was their own colleagues, who got successes in his/her own context. So, the strategies were like immediate takeaways for the participants which best fit in their own classroom

contexts as one of the participants mentioned below.

> I came across many good and unfamiliar strategies which could be applied in our class practically.

Through the use of the word 'practically', the above participant hinted that the strategies he learnt in the conference was equally context appropriate, so he/she could apply them in their immediate classroom situation. In a regular conference, the invited experts or presenters, in general, talk about their academic work. This could involve their scholarship or theories or the pedagogical underpinnings they are exploring, which could often be far beyond the actual pedagogical concerns, and some participants may not feel comfortable about associating such talk with their own teaching learning experience. This could be owing to several reasons: perhaps due to the participant's first-time attendance in such a conference, and he/she needs some time to become familiar with the structure of the conference or due to it being the first time he/she has been exposed to such a formal talk. However, in this approach, although a participant attends a conference for the first time and it is their first acquaintance with a formal talk, they will be able to comfortably link to the presenters' talk, for the majority of presenters share the same context as audiences do.

One of the participants in the following reply, mentioned games and other classroom activities which he came to know in the conference.

> 1. came to know new pedagogical dimension like games and classroom activities 2…. 3. shared some of the classroom practices

Because the participant who attended the session shared a similar context to the presenter who shared the ideas of games and classroom activities with the audience, he/she quickly noticed some pedagogical strategies, such as using games in the classroom. This revealed that talk relating to their own experiences in such an event might lead to the discourse of context sensitive strategies. As a result, the participants might be able to associate the discussions with their own context and find in them immediate takeaways for the future classes.

3. Building a wider community
In this approach of sharing success stories, the participants acknowledged and applauded the success of their own colleagues, and equally, talked about the successes they had obtained in their own classrooms with each other. One of the male participants mentioned:

It was an opportunity for educators to learn and share their successes. We could exchange our views and develop networking with people involved in the field.

The above participant stated that he could learn from other educators who shared their stories and network with the people with similar interests. There was a sense of gaining some insights through exchange of ideas. Similarly, one of the participants mentioned the collaboration with local and foreign teachers as one of the three things she liked in the conference.

Colabrate [sic] with local and foreign teachers to enhance ones teaching skills.

There were few presenters from the countries other than Nepal who presented their success stories face-to-face and through online mode. The participant above states that alongside the collaboration with local teachers, collaboration with foreign teachers becomes possible in such a conference which helps them to establish and expand their network. The network is particularly with the teachers who share similar interest.

In this model, the participants celebrate their achievements, exchange their ideas and become engaged in further discourse. In this way, they begin to establish and extend their network with other colleagues who are working in a way they are working, having shared the same context. The difference between the community they achieve in this approach and in other general conference is that in this conference, they realize their own colleague's potential and start sharing their own stories with them and build a rapport comfortably and more naturally, whereas in an ordinary conference, they try to establish their rapport with some experts as they wish for it, and the network may not be productive to address their regular teaching learning problems. It seems that the success story conference helped them build a community in which the relationship of the members is primarily horizontal (teacher-teacher) whereas in other general conferences, in many cases, the participants was looking for the vertical relationship (teacher-expert).

4. Teachers as mentors/trainers
A co-teacher can be a guide, mentor and friend to help address the regular teaching learning concern. In this approach, since a co-teacher/ their own-colleague shares teaching tips in a form of successes as he/she has achieved it, he/she is helping a large community to be trained.

One of the participants highlighted the support he received from the conference in the following ways:

1. Involvement of large no. of participants from different subjects has helped us to know about the methodology of teaching different subjects.

2. Has helped in enhancing personality development as it has helped to build up confidence level.

The participant above has mentioned how he could learn methods related to dealing with different content areas, and how it further helped him develop his confidence in presenting ideas with others. On a slightly different note, one of the participants mentioned the supportive role of the feedback received during the presentation.

It [Success story conference] was really helpful in a number of ways. Two of them can be a) While sharing my story, I was communicating what had been a private experience for long time. It means I was making my story public. b) I also got feedback on what I shared that has helped me to continue some of my ideas and modify the other.

The above participant highlighted how they could make their story public after communicating their professional gain, which has remained private for quite a long time, and secondly he states how the feedback that other participants provide on what we share helps us to decide whether to continue the success as it is or to modify as suggested by the other participants.

In this approach, again, the teachers offered some clues about teaching and learning from their own regular experiences which they thought went well in the classroom. Teachers were regarded as mentors/trainers, as they helped their colleagues, so there was no longer a vertical relationship. As a result, there was a positive bond for co-learning and co-sharing, with the horizontal relationship as expressed in the above response, which shows how they learned, what they could do further by receiving feedback on their success stories. The participants shared their success stories with mentors or other colleagues, and at the same time, they received feedback on their stories and learned from other's stories. This gave them a 'we-are-like-you' feeling. In the success story conference, some teachers anticipated that in the following year, they would present their success stories as they had some which they believed could contribute to other teachers.

Apart from these four themes, in response to the third question related to suggestion for the future success story conference, many participants hinted that instead of one day, the number of days of the conference had to be maximized. Some participants also mentioned that some more highly successful people and experts had to be invited in the conference.

Participant A

It was indeed wonderful. Next time, let's call more people who are highly successful in their teaching career.

Participant B

1. at least for two days
2. inviting more experts

These responses depict that they would have wished to gain insights from reputed people in their field. Their responses also have other layers of meaning, such as the fact that the participants are still 'expert-centred' and not yet confident in the insights of fellow teachers. It is also equally connected to the culture of listening to experts in the conference, as mentioned above, and in a way we tend to be brainwashed into dependence. This argument is made here in light of the nature of the success story conference i.e., the rationale of the success story conference was different than any regular conferences. No doubt, to bring a variety in sessions and also to make participants feel that they are attending a kind of conference which they visualize, expert sessions can be useful. However, given such bottom-up events, focus should be given to their own experiences.

Conclusion

Successes have power, as they always push us forward. The reality is that we do not talk about successes often, as it is little overwhelming and difficult to highlight one's own professional success. The wider space of a conference has proved to become a highly productive platform where they can celebrate and exchange their own successes. It ultimately helps teachers learn from one another realizing their own potentials. It equally assists the participants in establishing and expanding a wider community to support their own professional development. As a success story conference is bottom-up in nature, it directly addresses their own contextual issues and concerns. Motivation is another aspect that such an event can address, because teachers happen to be encouraged to apply teaching strategies that their colleagues share with them in their immediate classrooms, as their colleagues have successfully implemented those strategies in the similar context effectively.

The success story conference could be enhanced in the future, with more guidance to participants to reflect on the reasons for success and ways in which success can be expanded. We can learn a lot by telling stories of success and by listening carefully to one another's stories. To help

with this, as we listen to or tell our stories, we have to think especially about *why* certain experiences were successful and *how* we can build on those experiences to generate further success.

The next interesting aspect that we need to consider when organizing bottom up event is that we need to know the critical dimension of such event, such as 'focus on one another' should have a bigger space compared to 'focus on experts' in the event. It is necessary and equally good to invite a notable speaker, as we did in the conference, in order to add value to the conference and equally learn from them. However, we also need to understand that too much of focus on experts can build reliance of the participants on experts as a result, and this might promote deficit model. Thus, 'focus on one another' has to be at the centre of such event so that teachers get more used to the idea of relying on one another of insights.

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