

Review of *Using Wisdom Stories in Language Teacher Education: How Ancient Wisdom, Anecdotes and Aphorisms Can Enhance Teacher Training and Development*, written by Alan Maley (2024). Pavilion Publishing & Media, 304 pp. ISBN: 978-1-80388-361-8 (ePDF).

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It was going to be our first community meeting in a teacher-research project, where I collaborated with teacher-researchers and mentors from Thailand as an international mentor. Besides our roles in the project, we were all language teachers and the main goal of the meeting was to get to know each other as colleagues. My task was twofold: firstly, to come up with an idea for an open, heart-to-heart discussion where teachers could freely talk about their views on teaching and learning. Secondly, I needed to spend no more than an hour on the discussion, since teachers are always busy, and, therefore, time should be spent efficiently.

I found a solution to my dilemma in the book I am reviewing in the story titled *The wise man and the bee* (p.15). The story depicts a common situation, where a teacher asks their students what lessons they learned from the bee who was desperate to escape through a half-opened window in the classroom. The story takes an unexpected turn when one of the students complains that the teacher keeps challenging them with his questions instead of providing answers. I was so fascinated by the story and its morals that I took the risk and organized our meeting around that story, even though I was not sure about the teachers' willingness and readiness for collaborative reflection. Could I expect that the story would create the kind of a risk-free environment, where the teachers with different teaching and classroom contexts, would be eager to negotiate the meaning of the story and reflect on their teaching and learning principles? Thanks to the story, the meeting became an hour-long lively discussion fleshing out many teachers' values and beliefs about the role of a teacher and a student in a classroom.

The book by Alan Maley *Using wisdom stories in language teacher education* views teachers' experiences as a focal point for their professional development, and a cornerstone of their beliefs. This belief system is shaped by unique circumstances and classroom settings of each teacher and is made visible through the stories teachers live, tell, retell and relive in their classrooms (Ross and Chan, 2016). Utilizing stories as a specific genre, the book aims to provide teachers with plenty of opportunities to reflect on their beliefs, examine their values and acknowledge and appreciate their teaching practices, which altogether might be far more influential on teachers' decision-making than many theories.

The volume consists of two parts. Part One, called *Wisdom stories for teacher education*, is a compilation of 85 carefully selected narrations from different ethnic groups, commonly known as parables, fables, myths, and fairy tales, which have been well-documented and are available now as published sources. These texts stand out as artifacts of human civilization, and encapsulate ancient wisdom passed down from previous generations. Part Two, named *Other texts to spark discussion*, features a rich collection of real-life inspired accounts, some of which are authored by renowned

thinkers and educators of our times. Others are written by Alan Maley himself, or generously contributed by his friends, whose names are familiar to language teachers through other ELT-related books. Told in the form of *Personal anecdotes, Poems, Quotations, Metaphors, and Books for further discussion*, these five subsections of Part Two shift the focus from universal wisdom to individual teachers' insights that have become illuminating moments for their entire teaching lives.

In the Introduction, the author discusses the role of stories in the history of human civilization, the cultural identity stories embody, and their ability to bridge the gap between our imaginary and everyday reality to help us make a better sense of the world around us. Storytelling has been accompanying people from the early ages, and has become one of the features that distinguishes humankind from other species. As Alan Maley highlights the notion of 'a good story', namely, one with a strong immersive effect on the listener, he unpacks its versatile educational capacities. Stories, besides encouraging critical and associative thinking, developing auditory and verbal skills, invoke readers' intuition, empathy, and creativity. These qualities and skills are regulated by the right-hemisphere of the brain accountable for emotions and sensitivity that balances the teaching process making it more inclusive of different learning styles.

So, while stories are not strangers to ELT classroom contexts, where they are widely used as a source of language and content input, the author expounds *Wisdom Stories* as a contribution to teacher development (TD), which he considers as a form of holistic, personal and professional growth. The questions posed in the section "*What is Teacher Development (TD) / Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and why does it matter?*" are answered by an overview of the principal difference between 'knowing' and 'nourishing'. While the former relates to subject-specific knowledge and skills, usually structured and prescribed by training, the latter refers to teachers' attitude to and ability for reflection, the self-examination of needs, and defining personal and professional objectives. The stories collected in the book 'nourish' the growth of these qualities and, as such, they are deemed crucial for teachers who wish to maintain their learning curiosity and motivation for teaching throughout their career.

To optimize the use of the stories, the author provides a detailed step-by-step framework, called *The 8Rs*. This is organized around 8 cognitive strategies: *Read, Reflect, Relate, Respond, Recommend, Reinforce, Research, and Record*. All are designed to encourage open discussion, collaboration, and an exchange of opinions when teachers negotiate the meaning of the stories and relate them to their own practice. Besides the fully-structured universal framework, each individual story is followed by specific discussion prompts that can serve as lesson starters or entry points for reflection. Despite the detailed guidelines on the use of the stories provided, they do not tell readers what to think. To some extent, this is secured by the nature of the stories, which, as admitted by the author "seem at first sight to be nonsensical and paradoxical, so that we have to come at them obliquely. That is precisely their value" (p. 286). Furthermore, the effect is reinforced by a set of questions following the framework, named *Specific activities*. These questions prime teachers to conduct a self-audit of their personal strengths and weaknesses, explore the complexities of pedagogical decision-making, and enhance the potential for professional growth. Indeed, questioning is one of the book's standout strengths, as it skillfully engages teachers in the exploration of possible practical implications of the stories by asking themselves, "*How would I react to the situation?*", "*What should I learn from the story?*", "*What are the pros and cons of my decision?*"

It is astonishing how the volume manages to draw parallels between diverse or even opposite perspectives to help teachers see familiar things in a new light. Story No. 28, *The Spoons*, (p. 46) challenges teachers to ponder over the costs and benefits of cooperation versus competition in a teacher community. The scenes described in the story make teasing allusions to a teachers' hell and a teacher's paradise, where the only difference between the two places is how teachers value and support each other. The story primes teachers to reflect on how far the well-being of one individual teacher depends on the well-being of an entire teacher community and whether autonomy is an optimal condition for teacher professional development. In the same way, many *Personal Anecdotes*

recall a double-edged experience, drawing attention to the learner's and teacher's different perspectives on key issues occurring in language classrooms. For example, a story by Cynthia Beresford, UK: *Seeing myself* (p. 117) depicts a situation which might resonate with many readers of the book. It describes a teacher's anxiety about being video-recorded, which at the same time is counterbalanced by a teacher's desire to observe a lesson through the students' perspective. The story emphasizes that students' achievements are determined not only by how much knowledge a teacher possesses, but also by experiences students have in that class (Almond, 2019).

All the stories in the book are multifaceted, versatile and open to interpretations that nurture group discussions on teachers' concerns and good practices. The combination of a story with open-ended questions allows teacher educators to integrate such conversations seamlessly into their training sessions. While selecting a story for a particular group of teachers and pursuing certain learning objectives, teacher educators have to trust their personal comprehension of the story. This might depend on how the story will be viewed by teacher trainees and it might yield valuable, yet unexpected learning outcomes. However, the author may have considered the creation of an *Index* as a list of recommendations to address specific stories, which discuss certain methodological and pedagogical concepts and notions referred to in the stories. In further editions, such a feature could ease the choice of the 'right' story for a particular group of teachers and facilitate the planning of lessons.

How important are stories as a learning tool for teachers? The book proves that stories are an invaluable resource bank to draw upon to nourish teachers' self-esteem, learning curiosity, imaginative empathy and critical analysis. Stories may or may not result in actions, but they will make a principal difference in how teachers view their profession. I observed it happening during our first community meeting discussion. The story *The wise man and the bee* prompted my teacher colleagues to differentiate principles from assumptions to justify their positions, and re-evaluate their attitudes towards 'a good teacher' and 'a good student'. As a teacher-trainer of both pre-service and in-service language teachers, I would highly recommend this book as a piece of refreshing and inspiring reading, and a transformative tool for all practitioners in ELT to enrich teacher education programs and advance teacher professional development.

## References

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## About the author

**Ella Maksakova** holds an MA in TESOL and has been in teaching profession for more than 15 years, working in a variety of learning contexts. Currently she works at Webster University, as a teacher-educator delivering courses on principles of language assessment, materials development, theories of second language acquisition and teaching grammar communicatively to pre- and in-service EFL teachers in Uzbekistan. She has been active in mentoring teachers from different countries in teacher-research as a form of teacher's professional development, aimed to help teachers explore and improve their teaching. She has been leading a project on training special educational specialists in LEGO Therapy for children with autism spectrum disorder.