

Effective Storytelling to Engage Learners: Once upon a Time

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"Tell me a fact and I'll learn it. Tell me the truth and I'll believe it. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever."

- Indian proverb

Abstract

With an expanding and ever-adapting landscape in education, this chapter looks to the efficacy of storytelling as it applies to the mindset of learning. Both physical classrooms and online portals offer insight into how to better facilitate optimal student engagement. Storytelling as a tool enhances a student's ability to absorb information, creates neural connections, and facilitates an increased ability to retain and recall relevant information. The impact of storytelling, designing lesson plans, and creating story through improvisation, are discussed to illustrate how students engage with increased meaning and purpose when information is integrated into a felt experience. The effective use of story fosters creative expression, critical synthesis, analysis, imagination, self-awareness, and intentionality. Lecture alone can diminish focus, while information drain can increase stress and anxiety. Either can be tempered by a well-placed, thought-provoking tapestry of events which can soothe the worried mind or ignite a lethargic one.

1. A Good Story

Stories have forever been a central element in our human existence to understand our external world, our very selves, and our evolving human experience. Our collective desire to not only share our own stories but also learn from the accounts of others has a permeating impact on our very nature, pursuits, and reasoning with the unknown. I'm reminded of grade eight geography class. I remember it vividly because my teacher, Mr. Jonson, designed it that way. He told stories. Stories we could relate to. Stories about us. They were detailed and relevant because he was paying attention, and that is what made him an excellent teacher. He would introduce characters and take them on adventures in the places we were learning about, and soon you could see, smell, sometimes even taste the experience. It didn't take long for Mr. J to hook you. Sometimes he'd pull a gem from his greatest hits story collection; other times, it was a "new release", but he always wove our daily lesson into a sequence of events that would forever connect you to a place on Earth you never knew existed. It was impossible to walk out of that class without carrying someplace in the world along with you.

1.1. Story as a Tool

Storytelling in education is nothing new - far from it. From Ancient Man to Instagram, it is through storytelling that we continue to learn about ourselves. In education, storytelling methods would most commonly be described as an instructor's chosen "style", reserved for those with a knack for the tapestry in the telling. There is much evidence to support the use of story as an essential tool, worth embedding in our range of educational curricula and effective in its use by all instructors. In certain cases, a story may not seem like an obvious choice or even effective use of time

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during a lesson. For this reason, pertaining to the construct of curriculum, the integration of storytelling seems to lack systemization. Stories in math may not help one get to an answer—the numbers either add up or they do not—but a story, in any case, can be used to engage students and enhance retention of information. Stories open pathways in more ways than one.

1.2 Significance

Stimulus in the brain creates a pattern of neuronal activity. Those patterns are where our memory occurs. What is the efficacy by which a memory becomes imprinted in our minds? Research and discoveries in cognitive neuroscience point us to the hippocampus and amygdala, the brain's emotional centers for remembering. It highlights information, thereby affecting all the phases of memory formation. Emotion, or felt experience, thus enhances our memories. Enhancing memory improves recall overall. To make our memory stronger, it helps to attach significance to our experiences. Applying the same notion to learning and adding significance to information can subsequently increase retention. Therefore, the integration of stories and felt experience in all courses of study is a means by which best engagement occurs. Through the examination of both bricks and mortar classrooms and online platforms, the elements of emotional connection, teacher presence, imagination-enrolment, and active learning can create effective and positive outcomes for students and instructors alike, pertaining but not exclusive to online classrooms and a post-COVID 19 (1) In the 2018 article, *Exploring Imagination in Learning*, G. Judson supports the necessity of story, stating "Emotion...in their memories." (page 4). Storytelling is a "felt experience" tool that teachers at any educational level and field of study can use to elevate engagement in learning for their students. In both online and brick and mortar classrooms, integrating story activates the listener's positive emotional state and hooks information into a strong memory template. The memory becomes more durable as the learning follows the narrative pattern that is connected to a theme, concept, or experience. (2) If engagement is the goal, then stories are the steppingstones to get you there.

1.3 Adaptation

This new era has shone an emphasis on learner engagement. It creates an opportunity to discover new and effective ways to connect with students. The success of online learning varies depending on the individual student, teacher presence (3) and the methods utilized to engage in learning in the course of study. In regard to self-directed learning, the student has chosen their area of study to consume on their own schedule using their own methods of research. They may be provided with reference materials and recommended reading, along with submission deadlines, all without the stimulated engagement and support of teacher presence. But in teacher-led courses, the teacher's intention is to create sustainable engagement with the expectation that there be an agreement of reciprocity from their students. Many factors can contribute to the success or failure of this agreement.

At the onset of COVID, students transitioned overnight from physical classrooms to online learning exclusively, and a reframing of an existing element came to the fore. Engagement. Students and teachers alike had to pivot, dig deep and navigate their way through this novel process. At the discovery of many, there was productivity there, surprising ease of use, and a framework that we were all in together. However, the continuation of online learning both out of necessity and by choice carries with it the occurrence of a sort of hedonic adaptation. (4) The buzz can wear off. We are left with the same old question; how can teachers most effectively engage their students in learning? The caveat to this being, especially now, in a post-COVID era and in an age with an emphasis on screens. Enter screen fatigue. With wireless devices constantly on and unseen by an online instructor, students are often multitasking, leading to distraction and disengagement over time. Storytelling and imagination-enrolment may be the remedy. A clear mandate may be to create exploratory classrooms and for lessons and lectures to become more of a conversation to avoid information-drain. (within reason regarding class time and relevant questions

and feedback) An online example would be “Chats” over ZOOM, which provides an opportunity for an immersive interactive experience for all. Students can ask questions, provide feedback, introduce ideas without interrupting a lecture in progress. This applies to any interactive learning that is also available in physical classrooms. An instructor can choose to incorporate relevant questions into the conversation or allow time for responses and discussion once the lesson is complete. The same conversation applies to physical classrooms and how educators structure their lessons and prioritize their time. Communication falls short without comprehension, and discussions involving all participants allows for active learning, (5) imagination-enrolment, and felt experience. By utilizing these cognitive tools, teachers can lead the way to effective engagement.

2. Individuality

Individuality in learning exists. Not all students are created equal. By equal, I refer to how a student learns to use his/her mind in ways unfamiliar to us/one another. For this reason, also, not every student easily aligns with every instructor. Instructors, too, span the gamut of expertise, unconscious biases, and personality types. As the possibility of a teacher/student disconnect exists as a result of one or all of these factors, it often becomes a 'grin and bear it' situation. In fact, the notion of finding a connection in some situations seems too far-reaching. In many areas and levels of study, a direct connection with one's instructor is not necessary. In most circumstances, where connection is mandated, even then, students may still choose to disengage. It is a lack of stimulus as a result of “information drain” that we want to avoid. This is made possible by sharing insights, metaphors, and felt experience in a relevant framework. By telling a story, the listener shifts into a state of curiosity in his/her mind, and that important element of curiosity tempers judgment by promoting narrative transportation (the extended transportation imagery model: a meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of consumers narrative transportation) allowing for a mindset conducive to maximizing the absorption of information. In a nutshell, an instructor/teacher who tells a story contributes to their student's sense of calm and well-being.

As human beings, social interaction is conducive to enriched experiences. Pertaining to online learning, even in the most subtle of circumstances, the absence of the felt experience in the classroom can create diminished connectivity and decreased impact for both student and instructor. A story touches everyone. Therefore, connecting storytelling principles to information promotes the engagement of learning and can also traverse the boundaries of different-styled learning. The necessity for connectivity and its reach to a broader range of students is essential as online teaching facilitates universality and an opportunity for educators to create curiosity, igniting classrooms through felt experiences that connect students to the relevant subject matter. Story elevates impact. For teachers, the reward is in having reached more of their students, more of the time. Applying this cognitive psychology to online teaching enriches exchanges and enhances effective engagement.

What students can learn independently online versus what they learn in a classroom from an instructor or teacher are also not created equal. The awareness of this divide and its differentiating principles is essential to creating fundamental strategies to deepen the relevancy of a teacher's role. A significant element that results from a storytelling and imagination-enrolment style of engagement is the assurance that students have the opportunity to absorb materials in a meaningful way. Stories create depth, where fact-based information may not. Evocative imagery promotes participation in the action of a narrative and lends to a student's expression of personal agency in their learning. Individuals listening to a story respond automatically, by participating, in a sense, in the action of the narrative, resulting in the sense of ownership of the information and an overcoming of anxiety overall.

As mentioned above, a strong teacher presence makes a measurable difference in both brick and mortar classrooms and remote online learning. The relevancy of the teacher is significantly enhanced using storytelling and active learning principles. Pertaining to remote online teaching, the engagement of imagination through storytelling can be facilitated through the presentation and shared interpretation of how the subject matter relates to the existing world around us. Thus, teachers facilitate the opportunity for students to use cognitive tools to discover connective solutions and formulate theories through tangible examples.

3. Story and Instructor Bias Concerns

Unconscious bias can occur in the telling of a story and therefore create a possible red flag in the use of storytelling as a teaching tool. This can be offset by explaining to students the broader trends and relationships in a topic of study and urging caution in drawing conclusions from a single anecdote or story. Additionally, to encourage an emphasis on felt experiences and imagination, thereby creating both a related understanding of the content as well as themselves. With a traditional emphasis on critical thinking, it's a challenging notion to integrate imagination into all courses of study, but it is how we discover new ways of thinking. It is a staid notion that the use of imagination removes us from reality rather than opens pathways to new thoughts, ideas, discoveries and solutions.

"Stories, then, are narratives that fix our emotional orientation to the elements that make them up. No other narrative form can do this. We ascribe affective meaning to events, and to people, and to our own lives, by plotting them into provisional or partial stories. The reason we might reasonably consider the story as the most important social invention is that they orient the emotions of their hearers to their contents."

"Imagination has always been a capacity we can use to expand what we know and how we respond to situations – to learn, in other words. It harnesses mindtools and processes and is resourceful." (6)

In situations where teachers and instructors require support in connecting stories to subject matter, there are a multitude of professional writers to consult with or employ in various modes, from novelists to screenplay writers and playwrights, keynote speakers, bloggers, and freelance journalists. This provides employment opportunities for content writers to create stories that effectively align with specific lessons in our multi-faceted education system. If we were to integrate story into all curricula, initial steps might include a practical approach to storytelling and imagination-enrolment instruction for teachers in training. Additionally, courses in storytelling can be designed for instructors at all levels, as well as writing courses, audiobooks, and TED Talks readily available with an emphasis on storytelling and delivery, rather than structure and grammar. Two recommended sources. (7)

4. Meaning and Connection

Every story needs a direction (knowing the ending beforehand), emotion, and meaning (a key message to move your audience). You need a character who creates empathy: someone who is in danger or is the victim of a catastrophe, a quest, or a simple dilemma. This character should invite action, challenging students to consider the message of the story, perhaps through a survival advantage. (8) Additionally, the character might undergo a transformation or arch as they succeed or fail to solve their problem, perhaps through a sense of specific design. Some stories are an account of a person, place, or thing with sufficient details, wherein the details themselves engage the listener. Every story needs an element of robust specificity, used to enhance simple details about the experience, using see, hear, feel, smell and taste to heighten the curiosity and relatability for the listener.

But whether a story is funny, dramatic, filled with horror, or unicorns, the imagery is a connector that flips the switch that leads to engagement. That is the magic of storytelling.

"Stories represent a fundamental way by which we interpret our experiences. They tap into our natural predispositions of seeking patterns, perceiving agency, simulating and connecting events, and imputing meaning into what we experience. Instructors can take advantage of this predisposition and facilitate student learning by viewing stories from a broad perspective and intentionally connecting stories and storytelling principles to the concepts and principles they want students to learn. Instructors can capture students' attention, nurture a more social atmosphere, and engage their students' emotions and cognitive abilities." (9)

Used effectively by instructors in all areas of study, stories save time, as students will have absorbed materials in a meaningful way, with increased retention and ownership of their knowledge. We must integrate and utilize the effects of these practices into lessons across all facets of learning. Enhanced memory and agency will be of

great service to each and every student moving forward through their curriculum, including areas of potentially heightened stress, such as tests and examinations.

5. Stress Factors and Meditation

The need for cognitive practices versus information overload is essential during times of crisis. Stress is a factor in our cognitive performance. For example, high stress can lead to blanking on recall, and low engagement can cause the mind to be unfocused. This phenomenon is known as Yerkes-Dodson Law (10). If levels of arousal are too low (boredom) or too high (anxiety or fear), performance will likely suffer. (11)

Meditation is increasingly being integrated into traditional curricula, having proven beneficial results for calming the brain and maximizing learning. An increasing number of educational institutions, currently predominant in the UK, up to 370 schools in England will begin to practice mindfulness as part of a study to improve mental health, (12), including Yale University., Coursera's, The Science of Happiness, (it's most popular course online). Additionally, in Canada, schools have introduced mindfulness and happiness courses to their selections - to name a few: Academy of Mindfulness and Contemplative Studies, University of Ottawa; Mindfulness in Modern Society, McMaster; The Science of Well Being, Mindfulness, School of Continual Studies, UofT; Mindfulness Studies, Humber College; Mindfulness programs, CAMH; Therapeutic Models of Mindfulness, Wilfred Laurier. These courses are designed for those who have an interest or desire to heighten their awareness and understanding in these fields of study. It also indicates a curiosity on the rise, as well as the efficacy of these practices overall. One doesn't need an entire course in meditation to reap some of the benefits of such practices in a traditional or online classroom. A growing number of adults are choosing to explore their own minds and thinking practices as a necessary way of life. These shifts are indicators that the use of mindfulness in all areas of study may produce impactful results.

Every day, front line services see children and teenagers struggling to get a grip on how they fit into an increasingly complex world. Practices such as meditation, when integrated into learning, can elevate the quality of learning and help significantly reduce a student's need for professional services. (13)

6. The End

It is with dedication and a passion that we, as educators, search for optimal means to provide effective learning for our students. The future may be altered by our recent pandemic, but this creates a much-needed opportunity to evolve and align our thinking with a rapidly changing world. The future is ready for an education-based, evolutionary leap. It begins with Once Upon a Time...

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Kelly Fanson is an instructor of Acting for Film, Television and Theatre at The Toronto Film School, Business Owner and “Entertrainer” at PhysBiz, and Producer at Real Life Wrongs. Kelly is an actor and voice artist who can be seen and heard regularly on TV and radio. A triple threat performer, director, producer and comedy writer, CCA winner, Kelly’s work across multiple disciplines addresses narratives of human experience. Kelly’s a proud mom of two.

