

The Power of Storytelling: Creating and Curating Stories for Deeper Learning and Higher Engagement

Introduction

The natural draw to storytelling can be harnessed to positively influence students' experiences and learning in the classroom. During this round table session, we will share our perspectives of teaching courses across multiple disciplines (e.g., organizational leadership, psychology, English) with the common theme of storytelling. We will also provide multiple examples of assignments and class activities revolving around storytelling, which we use to engage students in deeper content learning in our classrooms. The target audience for this session includes the full range of educators; this includes those who are curious about storytelling in teaching and want to start using it strategically, all the way to those who have extensive knowledge and practice developing content learning around storytelling. We envision a dynamic conversational session where all individuals involved in the session (the presenters included) learn and are inspired to craft new mechanisms for embedding storytelling into higher education courses.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Utilizing Storytelling in the Classroom

Storytelling is certainly pervasive across history and culture, and many teachers across a diversity of age groups utilize this technique to great effect. Historically, the usefulness of storytelling was to pass along knowledge and values. For this same reason, some current organizations utilize storytelling by encouraging long-time employees who are leaving the organization to pass on the important knowledge they acquired to newer employees (e.g., Wijetunge, 2012). The prevalence of productions around storytelling such as Suitcase Stories (<https://iine.org/suitcase-stories>) which empowers immigrants to share their stories on stage, and

the existence of associations of storytellers such as the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc., are both evidence that though the avenues of storytelling may change, people are resolute in its power. Storytelling is often embedded within courses as well; at times this is done in a purposeful and consistent manner, but many times it is done in piecemeal fashion. According to Woodhouse (2011), the purpose of “storytelling is to ‘humanize’ the process of learning by appealing to the students’ imagination” (p. 212). Our objective is to demonstrate the power of storytelling in university level courses and promote a MOBTS community discussion on it. We hope to do this through a roundtable discussion session that allows for further learning and idea generation towards the goal of including more storytelling in our classrooms.

Student engagement as an outcome is the focus of much pedagogical research at the university level. Kahn (1990) explains work engagement to be driven by three factors: meaningfulness, safety, and availability (of resources). Storytelling aims at creating all three of these within the classroom environment in order to activate meaning in course content for students, promote a sense of community which aligns to a safe environment for sharing and taking risks, and allows students to want to invest their available resources of cognitive effort and attention towards the content at hand. Tews, Jackson, Ramsay, and Michel (2014) conceptualize ‘fun’ in the classroom by the categories of fun *activities* and fun *delivery*. The latter is instructor-focused and includes storytelling, creative examples, and humor. Their study with an undergraduate sample found that fun delivery significantly positively impacted student engagement. In a change management course, Jabri and Pounder (2001) found that narratives or storytelling on the topic of change and management development provided students with a deep understanding of the real impacts of change on employees because such story-based learning

creates multi-faceted and more critical analyses of these concepts and theories through the awareness of both the self and others' perspectives.

However, crafting a strategic use of stories in a course can be as tricky as crafting the story itself. According to Brittenham, McLaughlin, and Mick (2017), “students can find themselves performing a high-wire act of engagement and resistance as they explore and invent the meanings of stories while responding to the conventions and expectations of an assignment” (p. 112). In this manner, management and organizational behavior professors may want to partner with English and Literature professors to understand their careful development of building stories into courses.

For instance, Newkirk (2014) contends that narrative is a preferred way of learning because students want explanations and patterns. Students make sense of the world and those around them through story (Christiansen, 2016; Newkirk, 2014). It is through the use of story that many learning benefits can be derived. Storytelling requires active listening. The more actively a student listens, the deeper the bond created (Gargiulo, 2005). Students can use stories as a way to not only connect with information, but also to recall it later. When a person tells a story, the audience can hear the personal interest and energy in the topic (Newkirk, 2012). Because of this, stories elicit student attention, giving them something to remember, reconsider, and reconnect with long after the story is shared.

Not only do stories help students learn, but they also help students connect with others. Gargiulo (2005) states, “the quickest path between yourself and another person is a story” (p. 21). Stories give students the opportunity to share experiences and consider other perspectives. Connections can be made through associations (Gargiulo, 2005) and understanding can be cultivated even when there is disagreement. “Listening to stories encourages us to reflect on our

similarities, appreciate other perspectives, and negotiate our differences” (Gargiulo, 2005, p. 26). Incorporating this preferred way of learning facilitates access to concepts, deep learning of ideas, and connecting with and understanding of others.

How students present these stories can also be as engaging as the stories themselves. By using digital stories, these multimedia products are “...valued for the richness of the data produced, as well as [their] amenability to engaging knowledge translation strategies, which allow findings to be disseminated and understood by the general population, rather than being relegated solely to the realms of academic readership” (Jager, et al., 2017, p. 2548). This encourages students to think more about content and audience while also learning and applying technological elements including editing software, authoring tools and electronic media outlets (Alismail, 2015; Bran, 2010; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2010). Likewise, teachers are able to use storytelling, and specifically digital storytelling, as an authentic and meaningful way in which students can present their learning (Baron et al., 1998).

Learning Objectives of Session

1. Participants will learn about the value of utilizing storytelling in multiple ways within management and organizational behavior courses as well as higher education courses in general.
2. Participants will be able to understand how to better incorporate stories and storytelling events and methods in creative ways towards the goal of increasing student engagement.
3. Participants will brainstorm their own ideas of embedding storytelling into their courses with the help of feedback from others in the session.

Session Description

1. We will first provide an informal overview of our backgrounds so participants understand our interest and experience in utilizing storytelling in our courses: 5 minutes

2. We will then provide the following excerpt (or part of it) to participants to promote an initial discussion in a focused direction: 10 minutes

“One way to understand teaching is to think of it as a process of storytelling about ourselves as professors and about the subjects we teach. On the one hand, we provide a narrative about our own lives in the hope that our interests and passions will reach out to our students and enable them to become engaged learners. On the other, we tell stories about the subject matter itself, the reasons for its importance, the ways in which it has developed, the questions it poses of reality and social relations, the problems it may help resolve, and even our own struggles to learn and teach it. The purpose of both these aspects of storytelling is to “humanize” the process of learning by appealing to the students’ imagination, so that they can consider themselves active participants in the pursuit of knowledge and feel empowered to tell stories about their own experience and deepen their understanding of the subject.”

- Woodhouse (2011, p. 212)

3. We will explain our process in creating courses with the overarching theme of storytelling, including the creation and curation of diverse assignment types and activities based around storytelling. We will also explain some guest speaker events (with veterans), community service opportunities (with the elderly, local nonprofits, and for Child and Family Services), readings (survivors of the Holocaust), the creation of students’ own stories, and a theatre event (Suitcase Stories—stories directly from immigrants’ own experiences in the USA) to a shared experience of palpable threads of storytelling throughout the semester: 15 minutes

4. We will share and explain 3-5 of our actual assignments and reflection journals of storytelling experiences. We will provide assignment directions for these to all participants so they can take them and make them their own if interested. This is meant to be a lively interactive exchange

among all participants and the presenters, as opposed to a structured question and answer period:
15 minutes

5. Importantly, we will spend the last fourth of the session time guiding participants in a discussion of their own ideas for embedding more storytelling into their courses, with time to receive feedback from others: 15 minutes

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