

Why Does Storytelling Work?

1. Stories give context

What we know to be true reflects our beliefs and what we value. In some organizations, such as science, what we know is what we can test by experimentation. In other organizations, such as firefighting, what we know is what worked. In academic organizations we know what we can think while in blue-collar organizations we know what we can do. In all organizations what is known changes over time because we cannot know, beyond all doubt, that every thought and action we have is, and always will be, true.

Stories give context for these changes as we move not so much toward what is correct but toward what is less wrong. When dealing with uncertain situations and problems the correct method may not offer the best route to a solution. Our perceptions and information may not represent what is actually happening (ambiguity), we may not have sufficient information to describe things (vagueness), or we may not have clear boundaries (fuzzy-bounded problems). We must then decide between “getting it right” vs. “getting it less wrong.”

Stories tell us how the system has changed over time. This change happens through resolution of the discrepancy that eventually occurs between knowledge and experience. Stories can also, on the immediate level, describe how things did not go well in our last encounter or event. Stories can describe where our beliefs come from and how they have changed over time.

Sailors in the 15th Century would see the mast of a ship before the ship appeared in the spyglass or the tops of mountains before the shoreline appeared to view. Such experiences could not occur with a flat earth. Stories led to shared knowledge and justification of a new belief, that the earth is round. This new belief would become new knowledge and this story would change from information sharing to support of others whose experience does not conform to dogma.

2. Stories give meaning

The brain has an innate drive to find meaning and patterns in the environment and to make sense from experience. The brain resists or discards information it considers useless if the information cannot be linked to other experiences. When this linkage occurs, new information becomes embedded into long-term memory. Stories use real-world experiences to link new information to previous experience making this information relevant to the learner. Stories present information in context (real life science or thematic instruction) so the learner can identify patterns and connect with previous experiences.

Stories can give emotion to new information. Emotion, inseparable from and integral to cognition, motivates the learner to learn. This can make the information personal even in a group of different individuals. Emotion, besides focusing attention, contributes to learning through more covert means by bringing information into the learner’s peripheral perception, a recognized path for learning. The teacher’s enthusiasm, through the storytelling, gives important signals about the value of the material.

Stories can engage the mind's natural curiosity for complex and meaningful challenges to deliver latent or covert learning. Motivational techniques at the beginning of a story can grab the learner's attention and encourage a personal connection to the material. Learning, compared to teaching, happens without intent at conscious and unconscious levels. Stories can help retain information for later processing or recall in similar situations.

3. Stories teach

Stories can relax the learner while presenting challenging scenarios. Challenge enhances learning while threat inhibits it. Maximum connections within the brain occur when the brain is both relaxed (low threat) and alert (high challenge). This produces a state of "relaxed alertness" which enables immersion in multiple, complex, yet authentic experiences. Because the brain can perform many functions simultaneously, this enriched environment enhances learning.

Stories combine information in a manner that avoids isolating information from its context. The full brain can then interact and communicate more fully and process information more effectively into long-term memory.

The brain's structure changes by learning, particularly with the use of auditory, visual, tactile and emotional cues. Stories assist in interpretations which affect observations and the new observations affect interpretations.

4. Stories transmit values and beliefs

The brain is a social brain and motivates the individual to observe others and conform to the expectations of others. Stories describe how to deal with paradoxes within an organization. Stories can support creativity where indicated and teach when conformity is best. Stories underscore the importance of loyalty and obedience without depreciating integrity and initiative.

5. Stories guide behavior

Stories can provide guidance for what one can only imagine. The organization cannot teach every contingency or plan for every exigency yet stories can give examples of how to act or describe how others have acted in the past, either well or poorly. Stories, realistic from actual or plausible events, can give vicarious feedback for decisions the novice may make. The immediacy of experience can produce better results when the story comes from a storyteller with field experience rather than the story from an authority figure within the organization.

Stories allow combining details of an event with the big picture to produce a more realistic problem for better learning. This approach that uses situation awareness can allow learners to customize their own programs for the specific environments in which they will work.

6. Stories give support

Stories can reduce threat as perceived by the learner. Threat, excess stress, anxiety, and feeling of helplessness interfere with learning. Stories can relay the experience of others, particularly the teacher, and reflect the common nature of these reactions and share how others have managed similar situations. Stories can help learners decompress when entering a learning situation which further enhances the learning experience.

Edelman, G.M. (1992). *Bright air, brilliant fire: On the matter of the mind*. New York: Basic.

Cain, N., & Cain, G. (1994). *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.

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Types of Stories

There are several ways storytellers categorize stories. This is how I like to do it:

LEGENDS - Stories based on a historical fact. Parts of the story are true, parts are exaggerated, and parts are fiction. You may want to find out which is which.

MYTHS AND RELIGIOUS STORIES – These are important in various cultures. Be careful telling these types to general audiences.

FAIRY AND FOLK TALES - Every culture and country has these. No one knows who originally made them up. Fairy tales contain magic while folk tales usually do not.

REALISTIC AND FAMILY STORIES - Be sure to get the facts correct in realistic stories. Family stories can have a few white lies but nothing to hurt anyone.

STORIES FROM BOOKS - Books are a great source but you must be aware of copyrighted material. Sometimes the author or compiler will have permission granted to tell the stories in a book.

The best way to get a story is to hear one told by a storyteller. If you want to tell the story you hear, just ask the storyteller. Most will let you.

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How to Learn a Story for Story Telling

1. Find a story that you really like or a subject that is important to you. Read it aloud. Make changes you feel are needed.
2. If you find that you make too many changes to the story for it to make sense to you then this version is not for you. Find another version or another story.

3. Read it again silently. Now, without looking at it try to tell what the story is about. If you have forgotten too much you may need to read it several more times...
4. Think of your story as a skeleton. You just need to learn the bare bones. The skull is most important - get right into the story so listeners know what this will be about. When you get to the feet - end it! You need to know this pattern. You will not need to memorize the story; just keep this pattern in your mind. Always end the story and know where in the story the end is.
5. Now “flesh out” your skeleton. Add the facts, descriptions and feelings. Every story should touch all the senses if possible. Think of that skull; fill the eyes, the nose, the ears and even the mouth in your story. Then remember your skin which covers everything - let people feel what you feel.
6. Tell your story to the end. Then go back and reread it to see if you left out something important. If you did, reread what came before and after the forgotten part and practice telling that part several times. Then tell the whole story until it feels comfortable.
7. At this point, try telling your story to someone. Choose someone who loves you very much and will give loving criticism. Or record yourself telling it with NO notes and then listen to yourself. Do not be too critical!
8. When telling your story and you forget a part, DO NOT SAY, “Oh, I forgot something”! Instead say, “Of course, before he left he had picked up . . .” or “Of course, she had told them . . .” It is all right to forget something if you remember to put it in.
9. Most important is to enjoy your story. Remember: The storyteller is always right - tell it your way then listen to someone tell it another way if there is time.
10. NOTE: Some people learn a story by listening to it over and over.
Some teachers tell new listeners to tell their story in front of a mirror. So do what makes you feel comfortable and remember: everyone loves hearing a story.

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Elements and Structure of a Story for Telling

When preparing a story to tell, the usual elements of a story are the same as writing a story - there is a beginning where you meet the characters, the middle which contains the problem, and the conclusion

where the problem is solved for a satisfactory conclusion. However, a spoken story differs from a written story. You are painting the story using only words for your picture. These are some elements I think a storyteller needs to consider.

The beginning must get the listener right into the story itself. Tell of the main character and the problem the character faces. Let us see through words where the character is and perhaps how he feels. This part must be brief to capture the attention of the audience.

Now is the time for some action. Any character in the story can provide the action. Or you may tell why the action is important and the perils characters may meet. Be brief, include only the elements needed to understand what is happening. The listeners want to hear the story and may be impatient.

Paint word pictures of the action as it happens. This is a good time to insert words to evoke the senses - smells, sounds, tastes, sight and or touch. These elements should not overpower the story but are needed to make the picture become real. Watch that descriptions are short and to the point. Events keep happening to the character who may seem to be in an undesirable dilemma.

The ending should be as brief as the beginning. If you are telling the story, be aware of the age of your audience. Some may be too young to accept a violent ending. This is the main difference between the written story and the told story. The teller can make changes if you see the audience is not ready for certain elements and some children are waiting for the evil parts to happen. However, be sure the ending is satisfactory and the main character can "...live happily ever after".

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