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Storytelling: A Valuable Teaching Tool

Posted By *Maryellen Weimer* On September 9, 2019 @ 5:01 am In For Those Who Teach | [No Comments](#)

About seven years ago I wrote a [blog post](#) ^[1] about a family meltdown. My manually dexterous and spatially oriented engineer spouse was trying to tell me and my not mentally gifted brother how to tie a load of boards on a cart. From his tractor seat in front of the cart, he barked orders, which we didn't understand and couldn't follow. Yelling ensued, and at height of the exchange, the entire load slid off the cart. I attempted to use this anecdote to illustrate how well-intentioned efforts to explain and execute don't always succeed in life or in the classroom. The story struck a chord. For months afterward, I'd be at some professional development event and feel a slap on my shoulder, and a voice I didn't recognize would ask, "Lost any more loads off that cart lately?" We'd laugh, and then I'd hear a story about failed communication in another family.

Stories can be memorable. It's their concreteness, specificity, and narrative organization that makes them so. Authors Landrum, Brakke, and McCarthy (2019) note that cognitive science further explains why they're memorable: "Human brains have evolved to process lived experiences sequentially in scripts, much like the narrative of a story" (p. 3). In other words, stories align with how we think. They're also powerful teachers, allowing us to learn from what happened in the story without experiencing it ourselves. And if that isn't enough to establish their value, longevity clinches the case. Some experts (cited in the reference above) estimate that humans have been telling stories for 27,000 years.

**FOR
Those
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from Maryellen Weimer

Landrum, Brakke, and McCarthy think that educators undervalue the power of storytelling as a pedagogical tool. Teachers can use stories to create interest, provide a structure for remembering course materials, share information in a form that makes sense, and cultivate teacher-students connections (p. 2). They recommend telling stories intentionally, to advance student understanding of the content. Stories can be entertaining, but that shouldn't be their main purpose. They also promote learning most effectively if they're personally relevant to students. Story details age along with those who tell them.

Our disciplines can be humanized with stories of those whose work advanced knowledge in the field—stories that explain not just what they discovered but how and why. How did they do their work? Did they experience failure? How did they handle it? What were they like as persons? Connecting with luminaries in a field can be hard; they're dead and lived in a different time, but many of them were once students who also faced learning challenges. Stories build connections between who created the knowledge and those who are learning it.

Two other risks come with storytelling, and what happened with my family meltdown anecdote illustrates one of them. The people who spoke about it recounted it without mention of the point I used it to make. Stories should illustrate, elaborate, or support something larger—a main point, a principle, a concept, or an idea. Because stories are more memorable than most points, story details may need to be downsized. The ideal is a story whose point is so embedded in the narrative that it can't be forgotten. As someone who loves to tell stories, I endorse the goal, but I don't always nail the story–point connections so tightly together.

The second risk involves telling stories in which you are always the exemplary main character. Those stories quickly wear thin, and not only in courses. Much more memorable and valuable for students are teacher accounts of failure, confusion, and misunderstanding, especially if those accounts pertain to learning struggles and the teacher expounds on the outcome: "I got it wrong, totally wrong, but here's what I learned from that mistake, and it's something I've never forgotten."

Student stories can also be instructive. They usually describe experiences and events relevant to students, but sometimes those stories aren't relevant to or well-informed by the content. When soliciting student stories, it's good to do so using a structure that highlights story-content connections. The e-book referenced below (Brakke & Houska, 2015) includes several good examples of ways to solicit relevant stories.

Stories don't diminish course content. Rather, they're spotlights teachers can use to illuminate it.

References

Brakke, K., & Houska, J. A. (2015). *Telling stories: The art and science of storytelling as an instructional strategy*. <https://teachpsych.org/ebooks/tellingstories.html> ^[2]

Landrum, R. E., Brakke, K., & McCarthy, M. A. (2019). The pedagogical power of storytelling. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 5(3), 247–253.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000152> ^[3]

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[1] blog post: <http://info.magnapubs.com/blog/articles/teaching-professor-blog/a-failure-to-communicate>

[2] <https://teachpsych.org/ebooks/tellingstories.html>:
<https://teachpsych.org/ebooks/tellingstories.html>

[3] <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000152>: <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000152>

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