

- The Teaching Professor - <https://www.teachingprofessor.com> -

The NPR Model of Teaching through Storytelling

Posted By *John Orlando* On April 1, 2019 @ 4:37 am In Teaching Strategies and Techniques | [No Comments](#)

Nearly all dedicated NPR listeners have had the experience of sitting in their car with the radio on after arriving at their destination simply because they could not tear themselves away from a fascinating segment. By contrast, most online students have had the experience of suffering through boring course content that produces little knowledge retention.

The difference is not between entertainment and learning. NPR has some of the most educational content available, so much so that I use a series of NPR stories about healthcare financing and reform in my medical ethics course. The difference is in the way that the information is conveyed, and by adopting the simple principles used by NPR a faculty member can radically transform the power and effectiveness of their online content.

The fundamental principle for creating any learning content is "Communicate, don't regurgitate." The difference between the two can be understood by answering a simple question: Why don't you use PowerPoint for a marriage proposal? Imagine firing up a PowerPoint and saying: "I will cover eight reasons why we should get married. Reason number one, there are a number of tax advantages to marriage. A study done in 2003 by ..."

This sounds funny because marriage proposals are about communication and emotion. Writing "I love you" in the sand is communicating. Going through the eight benefits of marriage is regurgitating. We communicate with marriage proposals because they are important. We want our audience to walk away understanding something and ready to act on that understanding.

By contrast, many faculty use their lessons to regurgitate facts, not communicate. They do this when they build lessons with a mindset to "covering content." This is just rolling through information and tossing that information out to an audience without much concern for whether it is caught. NPR segments are so effective because they are developed with a mindset of communicating, which is why they make for an excellent model for developing online course content.

NPR uses storytelling to build their segments, which is one of the most powerful means of teaching and communicating. For instance, when NPR wanted to explain how the structure of our healthcare system inflates costs with unnecessary procedures, it did so by examining why in the 1970s the women of Lewiston, Maine were having far more hysterectomies than the national average (Spiegel, 2009). This serves as a good case study in how to teach via storytelling.

Get their attention

Once you have decided to put your lesson into a story, you must come up with an opening hook. Most academics start lessons with an outline of what they will cover, but nobody will remember

the outline once they are into the lesson. A better approach is to say something that gets your audience's attention.

NPR started its segment with the story of a 29-year-old woman in Lewiston who had a hysterectomy, as did her boss, her best friend, and many others she knew. The piece then asked why so many women were having the invasive surgery. Starting with a question sparks curiosity in the mind of listeners and makes them invested in the answer.

At this point most academics would just spit out the answer, but this is a prime opportunity to get students engaged by allowing them to venture guesses. In a live class, the instructor can ask the students for potential answers. Notice how this is different from most questions asked in class that are just trying to get students to repeat something from the assigned readings. It's a question that gets students thinking.

Online instructors can pause the podcast or video to ask student to submit answers with a text comment. Ideally it would be a question that pops up during the segment, like those used in [EdPuzzle](#) ^[1], but the instructor can also just refer students to a discussion forum to answer it.

Without either of these options, NPR chose to simply ask the women of Lewiston what they thought. One woman suggested that Lewiston is mostly Catholic, and when women wanted to stop having babies, they chose a hysterectomy because the Catholic church is opposed to birth control. This is a perfectly reasonable guess, but it turns out to be wrong. Another guess would be that something in the environment was causing women to get uterine cancer, but that is also wrong.

Surprise

With the listener's ear now figuratively glued to the dial, NPR delivers the surprising fact that the reason has nothing to do with the women themselves. The answer is that doctors there had a much lower standard for doing a hysterectomy than elsewhere and were recommending the surgery much more often than other doctors with similar patients.

This introduces the underlying theme of the lesson: many doctors operate on a pay-for-service system and where you live and who your doctor is can have a huge influence on whether you have a medical procedure. Many instructors would just start the lesson by stating this fact, which does not create much interest in the average undergraduate student. But the way that the message emerged through a story, followed by a question and then a surprising answer to that question engaged the listener.

With further supporting examples, NPR is able to take a topic that most undergraduate students would find boring, healthcare financing, and bring it alive through storytelling.

NPR has a wonderful website chalk full of tutorials on teaching through storytelling at: <https://training.npr.org> ^[2]. Take a look for yourself, and think about how you can transform your teaching through storytelling.

Reference

Spiegel, A. (2009). The Telltale Wombs of Lewiston, Maine. *National Public Radio*. October, 8, 2009.

Article printed from The Teaching Professor: **<https://www.teachingprofessor.com>**

URL to article: **<https://www.teachingprofessor.com/?p=58785>**

URLs in this post:

[1] EdPuzzle: **<https://edpuzzle.com/>**

[2] <https://training.npr.org>: **<https://training.npr.org>**

Copyright © 2021 The Teaching Professor. All rights reserved.