

Training & Management Development Methods

Igniting instruction through a narrative spark

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It is so tempting . . . such an alluring idea that exploits our never-ending desires to take the path of least resistance, even if that path does not lead us to our intended destination: to tell is to teach.

When confronted with a void in organizational performance, we easily fall into tried-and-true patterns of behaviour – dig into the details of the domain, determine the specific topics that we feel will most likely address the problem, distil the associated lessons into a logical structure, and deliver the “solution” in a fact-filled presentation in easily digestible sound bites and bullets (either in a classroom, online, in documentation, or via some blend). It is a minor variation on the old teaching rule, “Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them.”

Our direct experiences, as teachers and students, whisper to us this is not the right thing to do, however. It is something that we know in our hearts to be true, but we have difficulty overcoming the inertia of “how we usually do it”. We end up getting carried away by the Sirens’ call of simply telling our audiences what they need to know/should do/ought to believe, and crossing our fingers that they understand it, will remember it, and will be able to use it on the job. And if those are not the results, it is the learner’s fault – after all, we TOLD them the information, didn’t we?

Sometimes the best solutions to the problems of today can be found in techniques from the past. In this article, I argue that, for certain topics of instruction and domains of knowledge, we can benefit greatly by blowing the dust off the ancient art of story-telling to enhance the effectiveness of our instructional designs.

