For sale: Baby shoes. Never used

Hemingway's six word story: 'For sale: Baby shoes. Never used' forces us to engage with the details provided, comparing them against our own experience, to derive a meaning that is personally resonant.

Pre-dating written communication, storytelling is the oldest and most natural methods that humans have used to convey knowledge from expert to novice. So – in the first article of a two part series – asks Jon Revelos, why don't we use it more in the context of organisational learning?

Organisational performance shortfalls prompt us to return to tried-and-tested behaviour patterns: dig into the details, determine the topics most likely to address the problem, distill the associated lessons into a logical structure and deliver the 'solution' in a fact-filled presentation in easily digestible soundbites – in line with the old teaching rule: 'Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them.'

Unfortunately, our direct experiences as teachers and students remind us this isn't the right thing to do. To tell is not to teach. Nonetheless, we tell the audience what it needs to know /should do /ought to believe, and cross our fingers that these people understand it, will remember it, and will be able to use it on the job. And if those aren't the results, it's the learner's fault. After all, we told them the information, didn't we?

Instructional designers (IDs), like experienced carpenters, know that certain tools have strengths and weaknesses, depending on the goal at hand. We know that we can't use the same instructional approaches to address different knowledge /skill gaps. But, in these days of compressed timeframes and reduced budgets, we can end up falling back on one-size-fits-all solutions that 'worked last time, so…'

An alternative – and highly effective – technique is to blow the dust off the ancient art of storytelling to enhance the effectiveness of our instructional designs.

For years, the world's business schools have burned the message into their students' brains that the analytical /quantitative is 'good', while the anecdotal /qualitative is 'bad'. So, MBAs take pride in charts, spreadsheets and facts, confident that they help to 'clarify' what's really going on, unencumbered of 'irrational' emotional thinking.

IDs tend to take a similar position. We do our learners the 'favour' of breaking down, organising and delivering content piecemeal. We 'help' our audiences to build their knowledge from the bottom up, brick by factual brick, by delivering, in self-contained segments, everything they need to know. We assume that our audiences will assemble the connections between these disparate items to mentally create a new knowledge 'whole'.

However, employees, shareholders and

Key points

- Storytelling puts content into a context that is relevant and recognisable to learners, which helps them understand why the information is important.

- Stories force us to engage with the details provided, comparing them against our own experiences, to derive a meaning that is personally resonant.

- The advantage of stories, from an instructional design perspective, is that they can help strengthen the three fundamental goals of effective courseware.

instructional design

learners are all human – and humans are illogical and irrational animals. People rarely 'behave properly' without strong internal motivation – and those actions aren't logically driven most of the time, despite our wishes and beliefs to the contrary. Humans are, primarily, socially driven.

Rather than ignoring this element in our nature, why not embrace and use it to our instructional advantage? We should allow engagement, motivation, and emotion to enhance our ability to learn and change, rather than repeatedly attempting to invoke change by adding to the already overflowing heap of fact-based rationale.

The most valuable information that companies have isn't filed in binders on bookshelves or encapsulated in Powerpoints, but is freely and informally exchanged in the hallways, at the water cooler and on the phone – in the form of stories about success, failure and insights born from struggle. In a knowledge economy, your workforce's collective 'know how' is your competitive advantage. Storytelling among your employees can provide a unique avenue to help maintain a high-level of organisational competency through potentially devastating cycles of attrition and the looming 'baby boomer brain drain'.
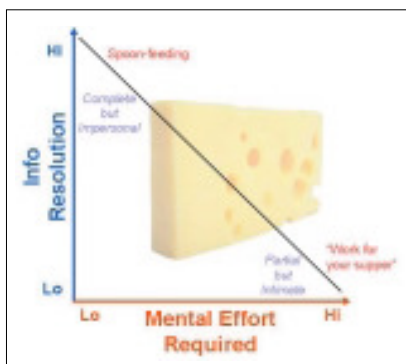
(inspired by Kathy Sierra)
Fig 1: The Swiss Cheese ID Principle

User experience expert Kathy Sierra has developed the 'Swiss Cheese Instructional Design Principle'. This argues that giving learners every piece of information they need can undermine the chances of long-term instructional success (see figure 1). Sierra believes that there is an inverse relationship between the 'resolution' of our instructional content and the amount of effort the learner must extend to understand it. The higher the 'resolution' of our teaching, the less mental horsepower is required to process it. Conversely, if we leave

'gaps' in our instruction, learners work at interpreting the meaning and relevance of content. This mental investment transforms the content from information provided by 'someone else' into something that is personal and meaningful to the learner – and, thus, more memorable.

This concept is one of the reasons that storytelling is such an effective knowledge sharing mechanism. Stories, by definition, have gaps and depend on our shared experience as humans to 'make sense' of them.

Stories serve as 'compression files of the mind'. They force us to engage with the details provided, comparing them against our own experiences, to derive a meaning that is personally resonant. This can be demonstrated with a nine-word tale: "Bob loves Mary. Mary loves John. Bob hates John." Jealousy; pain; unrequited affection – it's all there, but not formally mentioned. Or consider Hemingway's even more succinct six-word story: "For Sale: baby shoes, never used." Sense is made by the listener filling the gaps from their own knowledge of the world, not by the teller spoon-feeding a 'lesson'.

In one of his three heuristics for knowledge management, Dave Snowden said: "We always know more than we can say, and we will always say more than we can write down." Ask an expert how they do what they do – that which differentiates them from their colleagues – and they will usually respond: "I don't know". But if you ask them to tell you about an instance of success or failure, and what they did to enable that end, listeners have an insight into the elements and thought processes that comprise high skill.

The advantage of stories, from an ID perspective, is that they can help strengthen the three fundamental goals of effective courseware:

● **Comprehension** – does the audience understand the content being presented?
● **Retention** – will the audience remember the content in the long-term?
● **Application** – can the audience use the content to improve on-the-job performance, in the 'real world'?

If you want to capture and transfer implicit knowledge – that 'je ne sais quoi' that expert performers intuitively exhibit – bullet points and flowcharts don't deliver. Storytelling moves content into a context that is relevant and recognisable to learners, which helps them understand why the information is important.

Because of the way our brains are wired for associations and patterns, learners are predisposed to retain new information if it's stored in relation to old information. This is related to case-based reasoning. Wholly novel information is difficult to remember because we have no reference case on which to expand. Stories are multifaceted cases which are more easily accommodated into memory than de-contextualised facts and figures.

Content that is understood and stored in relation to familiar real-world scenarios is more likely to be (a) brought to mind at the appropriate moment of need, and (b) put into practice properly, based on the lesson(s) embedded within the tale.

By Jon Revelos

The value of stories

There is an old story that a young student faithfully travelled to study at the foot of his teacher each day, month after month, year after year. The Master almost never spoke on subjects directly, but opted to share his instruction through stories. One day, the student gathered his courage and asked: 'Why do you toil so, teaching me through stories, Master? Couldn't you simply teach me directly?'

The teacher replied: 'Bring me some water.'

The student returned to his home, retrieved a clean pot from the kitchen, went to the well, filled the pot with water, and returned to his Master. As the student offered it to his teacher, the Master said: 'Why have you brought me a pot when I asked only for water?'

This teacher in this story reminds us of the difference between the vessel of instruction and the instructional content itself. The story illustrates how it is often difficult, if not impossible, to teach some topics directly – how certain areas of instruction require a medium in which to embed the targeted lesson(s).

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