



Four Ways to use Story in course design

Jon Revelos concludes his series of articles on the value of storytelling in organisational learning.

In the most general sense, it may be reasonable to argue that storytelling is a slow, steady undercurrent to all instruction – a quiet, omnipresent element that pervades all knowledge sharing. While potentially true in theory, in practice there are domains to which it lends itself more readily than others. Story is just one of a myriad of tools that instructional designers (IDs) can choose to accomplish their specific objectives and, of course, different tools lend themselves to different purposes.

In general, the effectiveness of 'Story' increases with the cognitive complexity of the learning objectives. It may not be the tool of choice when you are targeting low-level facts, figures, and procedures (new software and product specifications, for instance). As 'softer skills' and domains with fewer hard-and-fast rules and more broad heuristics are targeted, however, tales rooted in experience provide a powerful alternative to 'traditional' instructional strategies. This is also true for topics that

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are traditionally seen as 'dry' and 'boring', such as regulatory and compliance training, or induction. In these instances, stories can provide the relevance and motivation necessary to engage the audience at a deeper, more meaningful level.

From a more application-based perspective, the following four specific categories for Story use can be applied as you tackle the design for your next course.

● Feedback and Remediation

The next time you design a knowledge check exercise, resist the urge to craft the incorrect feedback to mirror the traditional, 'Wrong – try again...' pattern, followed by some variation of explanation or hint as

'corrective support'. Instead, have someone from within the organisation pop up on screen at these moments to tell a story that is related to the misunderstanding at hand. This shift in feedback strategy will not only make the meaning of the content 'come alive', but it will also increase the likelihood that it will be properly recalled at the precise moment of need during a real sales call.

● Change Management

Terry Neil, a partner with Andersen Consulting in the '90s, said: "Change is a door that can only be opened from the inside."

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Key points

- In general, the effectiveness of 'Story' increases with the cognitive complexity of the learning objectives.
- Stories have particular value when related to: feedback and remediation; change management; knowledge sharing, and context-setting openings.
- Stories help to add meaning to new information. Meaning is a critical element in increasing retention. Without retention, there's no hope for application.



why a change is necessary, beneficial or strategic, but this approach often ends up like the farmer taking his horse to water. Until the audience decides for itself that it is 'thirsty', not much 'drinking' is going to occur.

We can help to encourage this motivation to accept change by setting aside the bulleted slides and left-brain approaches and solicit audiences with truthful stories that clearly convey where they are heading if nothing changes and what needs to be done to avoid that unattractive conclusion.

● Knowledge Sharing

The statistics and predictions related to the impending crisis that will occur when waves of baby boomers retire in the next few years have been well documented. There are similar concerns associated with the growing average number of jobs that workers will have over their career. The root of this problem is not a number-of-bodies issue, where each existing worker slot can simply be filled with a fresh recruit. It's a qualification issue – an in-house average-number-of-years-experience problem. And experience (implicit knowledge) isn't something that easily translates to course

handouts and job aids.

Making a concerted effort to get top-performers and near retirees to share their stories of know-how in a way that can be captured, indexed, organised and retrieved by novices in the future can help to head off this Great Brain Drain.

● Context-Setting Openings

As educational theorists have said, a great deal of the success or failure of instruction is linked to the early stages of the learning event. Beyond gaining attention or specifying outcomes, learners need to see why they should care. More than answering 'WIIFM', learners need to have conceptual hooks created in their brains, prior to any parade of data, that will allow for easier accommodation of targeted content.

Before jumping into the typical 'objectives' slide, create a need in the learner's heart and mind. Tell them a story related to the content that will follow, so they are better able to construct the tie between that information and their daily lives.

Storytelling's long and rich track record in successful information dissemination isn't, alone, enough to automatically make all stories appropriate or effective instructionally. Just as we all have the friend or relative who relates long-winded tales that seem to have no discernable point, designers should wield this powerful tool with careful, conscious purpose.

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While humans are amazingly good 'analogy machines' – able to draw lessons that are applicable to a personal situation

from a seemingly disparate situation – this ability to detect meaning is heavily influenced by the context and timing of the narrative. The exact same story of your conflict with a co-worker will be interpreted differently, depending on when it is told and what immediately preceded its telling. Additionally, individuals process everything through a personal filter, which alters which elements of a story resonate and are retained, and which are regarded as irrelevant and are dismissed. This is why a single story, told to a group, can be 'understood' in multiple ways – all of which may be valid!

For this reason, strong ID skills and proven methodologies are vital elements in coaxing the maximum impact out of stories. Without skillful mental and emotional preparation of the learner, and careful timing to coincide with a moment of instructional need, a powerful story can have its intended meaning misinterpreted, lost, or rendered impertinent. The simple three-act framework that Aristotle defined over 2,000 years ago – of beginning/ middle/ end or exposition/ complication/ resolution – continues to be a valid guide for story structure today. But, just as possessing a great set of paints doesn't make any of us a Picasso, putting words into an ancient framework doesn't make us a Shakespeare or Spielberg.

By clearly identifying your instructional goals, the type of targeted knowledge – explicit or implicit – and where the greatest moments of motivational, contextual, and/or instructional voids may occur within your course, you will be well on your way to harnessing and using the power of Story to increase your audience's ability to comprehend, retain, and apply new instructional content.

Stories help to add meaning to new information. Meaning is a critical element in increasing retention. Without retention, there's no hope for application.

By Jon Revelos

Credentials

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