

Once upon a Time...Storytelling as a Creative and Innovative Classroom Technique

INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of time, **Truth** was wandering the world when she came upon a town and first saw people. Delighted, she entered the town to speak to them, but when they saw her, they ran away screaming in terror.

Dismayed and discouraged, she left the town. Soon, she came across the most beautiful being she had ever seen, clothed in lovely robes of shimmering color. The being noticed how sad Truth was and asked the reason.

"When I saw the people, I was glad because I had so much to tell them." Truth said.
"But when they saw me, they were afraid and ran away"

"Well, of course, they ran away," the being said, *"for you are naked and people are greatly afraid of the naked truth. My name is Story and I have many of these beautiful robes. Here, take one and let us go into the town together."*

When the people saw Truth clothed in the beautiful garment of Story, they greeted her warmly and asked her to stay. ---a folk tale adapted by Tom Burger, 1999.

We all love a good story. It is medicine disguised as entertainment. It heals, it comforts, it stirs up memories, it brings tears and laughter. It teaches without preaching, mesmerizes while making a point. Storytelling builds community. It breaks down barriers by showing over and over again how much we have in common of the things that are important. Einstein said *'imagination is more important than knowledge'*. And storytelling loosens our imagination and liberates us to learn much more than we ever dared dream.

Appreciating and cultivating the art of storytelling can open up incredible avenues of learning in the psychology classroom in a human, live, face-to-face encounter that restores and keeps our connections with each other. I suggest that psychology instructors use storytelling as a most effective teaching tool to strengthen and enhance the learning process in a most memorable manner. We need to use storytelling as a significant component of our teaching.

Why? Because of the following reasons...

A. **Challenge:** _____ instructors (i.e. community colleges) face many classroom challenges

1. **Our students are already loaded down with significant stressors...** work responsibilities, family responsibilities, limited study skills or inadequate background preparation for college level work, and very real limitations on the actual amount of time available for serious academic inquiry. No question about it! They are stressed! These conditions often creates what I call the 'menu mentality'... "*Will that be on the test?*"
2. _____ **may be perceived as a rather difficult topic.** The majority of students do not take psychology in high school, as is the case of English, history, government, economics, etc. and so the concepts and vocabulary may be intimidating and pose a rather daunting challenge to psychology instructors. i.e. '*like, you know*' or '*far out!*' are not exactly empirically validated terms... '*like you know what I mean?*'
3. **The majority of our students are not _____ majors** and are in our classes because _____ is a degree requirement or it fits into their work schedule! The relevance of _____ to their personal and professional goals is not readily evident.
4. **We as _____ instructors face another monumental challenge.** Our 'programming' competes with the 'Jerry Springer' approach...sex, sensationalism, and superficiality! A large part of what passes for entertainment is designed to titillate, tease, and anesthetize audiences into buying an idea or product. Reflection, analysis, higher order cognitive skills are rarely exercised in the public media domain. Students are accustomed to being entertained! David Myers, a leading social psychologist, coined the term, '*cognitive miser*'. Or another appropriate term, he uses is '*mindlessness*'.

Yes, we have challenges...but where there are challenges...there are opportunities. Today, for a few moments, let us explore, story telling, a new and revolutionary approach that is as ancient as is the history of mankind. Story telling is likely to be the very oldest form of education. It certainly predates the written word! Pictorials such as Egyptian hieroglyphics and ancient cave drawings in France attest to the need to tell stories of greatness, of conquest. of hope, of despair, of the capriciousness of the gods, of the human condition. I propose that the mystical and magical power of story telling which captivated and educated our ancient ancestors is timeless and can be as effective in contemporary society...perhaps even more so. Story telling in the _____ classroom is an effective means to meet these challenges!

B. Storytelling as Solutions to the Challenges of the _____ Classroom.

An appropriate, well-told story has far-reaching benefits as a classroom experience.

1. Storytelling can help instructors to

a. Engage an audience. Stories capture our attention. Get us focused.

Story: On an unbearably hot, steamy day in the spring of 2001, Andrea Pia Yates, a young mother, in a middle class suburban neighborhood in Houston, Texas, methodically drowned her five children in the family bathtub. After laying their limp and lifeless bodies on the bed, she mechanically reported the incident to law enforcement officers.

Possible discussion and/or topics: insanity as a legal term, determinants of insanity, free will vs. determinism, mind/body interactions, pharmacological treatment of mental illness, stress and coping mechanisms

b. Introduce some rather 'dry' and technical material.

Story: Pavlov's comment to his lab assistant during the Russian Revolution.

Possible discussion and/or topics: scientific 'mind set' (objectivity vs. subjectivity), biographic information can be valuable in understanding theory.

c. Demonstrate a concept.

Story: "Did they have those way back when you were alive?"

Concept: Preoperational thought process in children. Difficulty in reverse thinking.

d. Reinforce concepts.

Story: 'little Albert'

Concepts: Review and reinforce with a practical application of classical conditioning in the acquisition of emotional responses, stimulus generalization, stimulus discrimination, use of flooding and/or systematic desensitization to 'unlearn' emotional responses. Introduce concepts associated with phobic disorder and psychotherapy techniques for treatment.

e. Encourage critical thinking skills.

Story: Use newspaper stories reporting some controversial or contradictory research. i.e. Caffeine enhances mental alertness. Caffeine closely linked to increase in breast cancer.

Concepts: Give students a list of critical thinking questions to use in an analytical review of both stories.

f. Review materials

Story: '625 towels story'

Concepts: Review basic premise of flooding, biology of flooding technique, use of behavior modification, ethics involved in institutional setting, use of milieu therapy, teleological or purposive behaviors...

g. Validate our authenticity

Story: change in client's voice level

Concept: Professional experiences confirm our legitimacy.

h. Connect with our students.

Story: "Mom, you wouldn't believe what a zero does to your grade average!"

Concept: Within limits, personal stories make us 'real'.

i. Challenge and 'stretch' our students

Story: Five ways to give and receive love. 'Car story'.

Concept: Human behavior is infinitely complex and not formulaic. Look beyond. Look deeper. Appreciate differences. Understanding self and others. Relationships.

j. **Encourage development of communication skills: verbal and written**

Story: *"Eye of the Storm"*

Concept: Students write reaction paper. Class discussion follows.

k. **Establish a sense of 'community' within the class**

Story: Human Growth and Development class begins with a family story about any stage of life that they have never told. They are free to pass on this activity.

Concept: I initiate this with a story about presenting my five year old brother a tablespoon of saliva as his 'medicine'. After this gross story, the class is pretty comfortable with sharing similar family stories.

l. **Encourage and emphasize more active learning approach over passivity.**

m. **Provide a 'safe', nonthreatening therapeutic environment for students**

Story: "Not one more minute of my life!"

Concept: Psychology classes are not psychotherapy sessions, however, instructors can use a story to 'speak' to some of those pains and hurts that our students have experienced or are currently experiencing. A neutral story can be very therapeutic.

n. **Inspire and encourage students.**

Story: First exam in college...17!

Concept: Difference in problem and challenge! Using setbacks as building blocks. Wake up calls! Decision making! Attribution theory. Locus of control concept.

2. **Storytelling can help students to**

a. **Integrate concepts into meaningful, personal patterns.**

After discussing Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, assign students to plan and orchestrate their 80th birthday party.

Concepts: Strengthens life-span concepts. Goal setting. Encourages self-exploration. Explores aging processes and implications.

b. **Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a psychological concept.**

Discuss Kohlberg's Han's dilemma. Divide students into small groups to develop their own story that could similarly identify moral stages of development.

Concepts: Evaluates Kohlberg's basic tenets about moral development. Encourages an in-depth exploration of moral development. Encourages group interaction. Reveals individual differences in thinking about moral development.

c. **Demonstrate understanding of difficult terminology.**

Develop an introduction to a story (3 or 4 lines) and then pass to a student who must use finish the idea by using a _____ Continue the process until all students have participated. i.e. terms such as independent variable, dependent variable, confounding variable... Students know in advance term (i.e. draw from a 'hat', volunteer for term, or teacher assigns terms).

Concepts: Encourages student to 'dig' for meaning and possible application of terms and move beyond memorizing definitions. Indicates understanding or lack thereof to instructor and provides opportunity to identify students' understanding of terms.

d. **Enhance self-exploration.**

Assign students to write their autobiography. Or use the Adlerian idea of writing the title to their autobiography, movie, television series...

Concepts: Goal setting. "Life scripts". "Self-fulfilling prophecy".

e. **Explore personal relationships.**

Show a small video clip from a favorite soap opera and let students discuss the intricacies of the personal relationships. After the fun has subsided, carefully analyze the story-line. Use different theoretical approaches to explain character's behaviors.

Concepts: Depends on the clip. Emotions. Body Language. Relationships.

f. **Apply problem-solving methodology.**

Develop a story about a _____ who is grappling with a research problem that appears to have no solution. Divide students into small groups and allow about five minutes to 'successfully' solve the dilemma. This could be useful to introduce, explore, or even review research methodologies.

Concepts: Application of steps in problem-solving. Heuristics. Algorithms. Means-end analysis. Creativity in problem solving process. Group dynamics.

g. **'Personalize' the psychology class. Gain personal insights.**

Students make a collage depicting a significant incident in their life. Volunteers explain the different collage items and their personal meaning.

Concepts: _____ has infinite 'take home' value.

h. **Apply critical thinking skills.**

See 'e' in Section 1.

i. **Strengthen communication skills: verbal and written.**

See 'j' in Section 1.

j. **Expand and broaden the world view.**

During a special week or month (i.e. Black History Month), ask students to share their story in the class and/or school newspaper.

Arrange with local school system for volunteer students to share their stories.

Concepts: Cultural pride emphasized. Shows both similarities and dissimilarities.

k. **Appreciate the uniqueness and diversity of others in the classroom.**

Ask students of different ethnic backgrounds to share a favorite family story.

Concepts: Provides opportunity to speak before others. Shows individuality and commonalities between and among class members.

l. **Develop and/or enhance social interaction skills.**

Concepts: Small group interaction and class discussions provide opportunities for social skill development.

m. **Demonstrate effective group membership skills. (i.e. cooperation...)**

Concepts. Small group interaction and class discussions provide opportunities to develop effective leadership skills and to identify effective group membership criteria. Problem solving skills. Group decision making. Groupthink.

n. **Read beyond information and reach for understanding and meaning.**

Read excerpt from '*Velveteen Rabbit*'.

Concepts: Aging process. Authenticity. Self-concept/self-esteem.

o. **Add meaning and depth to the life experiences.**

Students read '*Man's Search for Meaning*', '*Diary of Anne Frank*' or similar story.

Write reaction paper. Discuss in class.

Concepts: Existential psychology. Aggression. Coping mechanisms.

p. **Review materials.**

See 'f' in Section 1.

q. **Compare and/or contrast different _____ concepts.**

Students read brief biographic stories on different theorists (i.e. Adler and Rogers)

Discuss factors in each theorist's background that impacted their theoretical approach.

Concepts: 'Zeitgeist' concept. More comprehensive understanding of theory.

r. **Stimulate creativity. Think outside the box. Color outside the lines!**

Use a story circle. The instructor begins a story (i.e. two or three rather unusual ideas) and then passes to a student who follows up with another statement or two and then passes on....

Concepts: Language development. Word fluency. Creativity. Reaction rates.

Divergent and convergent thinking processes.

s. **'Connect' with other _____ class members.**

See 'j', and 'k' in Section 1. See 'b', 'e', 'f', 'g', 'j', 'k', and 'r' in Section 2.

t. **Become more interactive with other class members.**

Select a story or current movie that depicts a relatively common problem in families (i.e. substance abuse). Divide students into small groups to 'process' the story. Have several questions on psychological concepts to guide the discussion and to avoid a general 'bull' session. As soon as the first group begins to digress from the 'topic', stop the group activity and use a class discussion to process the story.

Concepts: Creating a comfortable, accepting learning environment facilitates the learning process. Develops awareness of 'universality' of problems.

u. **Have fun!**

Have a funny story contest! Establish appropriate criteria prior to activity. Students volunteer to tell a funny story. Class votes on funniest story and the winner receives a door prize!

Concepts: Humor as a stress releaser. Chemistry of humor. Individual perceptions of humor. Facial feedback hypothesis. Body language.

C. Sources of Stories

1. Folktales, fairy tales, myths, legends, fables, tall tales
2. Literature (novels, poetry, children's literature, short stories)
3. Real life experiences
4. Historical accounts (oral historians, nursing home residents, archives...)
5. Case studies.
6. Personal Experiences
7. Movies
8. Television programs...series, made for television movies, documentaries
9. Newscasts
10. Newspaper articles
11. Music, Songs
12. Student's personal experiences
13. Autobiographies

14. Biographies
15. Librarians, libraries
16. Drama
17. Professional story tellers
18. Videos
19. Cartoons
20. Art: art history, biographies of artists, humanities
21. Radio programs
22. Short stories
23. Family members
24. Professional colleagues
25. Parables, scriptures, religious stories
26. Friends
27. Websites
28. Textbooks (i.e. psychology, obviously, but also check out sociology, humanities, communication, English literature, poetry books, drama...)
29. Old psychology notes from classes you have taken, comments by your college or university professors,
30. Information from professional development workshops attended.
31. Tapes, CD's
32. Popular Books...i.e. Deborah Tannen "You Just Don't Understand"
33. Picture books
34. Nursery rhymes, animal stories
35. Local legends
36. Hero Tales
37. Epic stories
38. Dreams
39. Fantasies
40. Science fiction
41. Various cultural and ethnic sources

And now to bring it all together...

A story...

There was an old man camping at the edge of a village. When he awakened in the morning, he began saying his prayers to the rising sun. On this particular morning, he heard footsteps behind him and someone shouting, "*Master, master, where is it?*"

The old man turned around and saw a young peasant boy running up to him in great excitement.

The boy said, "*Master, I had a dream last night. In my dream a holy man gave me a precious jewel right at this place.*"

The old man nodded his head, reached down into the grass and pulled up a ruby the size of his fist.

The old man said, *"I found this ruby I don't know where. But I have no need for it, and you can have it."*

The boy couldn't believe his good fortune. He had never in his life held more than two copper coins in his hand. He held the ruby up to the sun, awash in its red shadow.

The peasant boy returned home with the ruby. All night long, he tossed and turned. The next morning he came upon the same old man as he walked to the fields where he worked.

It is said that the young man took the ruby out of his pocket and gave it back to the old man with these words, *"I do not want this. What I want is what you know that made it so easy to give it away."*

As told by nationally acclaimed story teller, Jim May.

Our stories define who I am and who you are and connect my soul and spirit to your soul and spirit in mysterious and wonderful ways.

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