Chapter XV
Telling Stories:
Connecting Theory and Experience in Classroom Conversations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter tells the story of how one course used storytelling to support class discussions and assessments. Stories were told by both the instructor and the learners, providing examples and non-examples of the concepts being addressed. Stories also were provided for class analysis and interpretation. Storytelling was found to be an effective tool for promoting conversation among students because it encourages reciprocity, is motivational, and helps learners make personal connections to the learning material. Instructors should scaffold storytelling for learners via both modeling and facilitation, indicating what types of stories are appropriate to share, what level of detail is necessary to support the connection between theory and experience, and how to demonstrate the connection between theory and experience.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are natural storytellers. Many of us end our days by engaging in conversation with loved ones, telling what we experienced earlier that day in the form of story. We meet new people and share information about our lives through stories. We pass stories down through generations of families and use them to explain things about the world to our children. A great deal of our everyday conversation is centered on the sharing of stories, whether small or large.

Learning through stories can take place through both our own stories and the stories of others. Stories help us situate abstract content in the practices of everyday life (Contu & Willmot,

2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and help learners remember facts and concepts more vividly than if they were merely isolated semantic memories (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001). The intentional or planned use of story has received attention during the last several years from a business and informal learning perspective (Denning, 2001; Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993), but has not fully infiltrated higher education as a practice. That said, stories commonly are told in the course of teaching a class without being credited as a learning artifact, and they frequently appear in writing by other names, such as case study or scenario. In higher education, stories more typically come from an instructor-as-storyteller paradigm, making them a rather teacher-centered instructional tool. However, a more learner-centered approach in which learners take part in the telling of stories can be instructionally effective.

This chapter discusses specifically how storytelling was integrated into an online section of a graduate-level educational psychology course. The roles in this course have been instructor and teaching assistant, respectively. Alternatively, the collective roles as the teller, listener, and evaluator of stories within learning conversations might be described. Essentially, the use of narrative was formally designed into this class as an intentional instructional and assessment strategy. Here the story of how this narrative-oriented class discourse was designed and how it functioned was told, based on the experiences and reflective notes taken during the semester.

BACKGROUND

Using Story to Support Learning Conversations

What are the potential advantages of using story to support learning? Rarely does one enter a class and hear "in this class you will learn how to tell stories about the class topic." Similarly, end of course assessments do not typically ask students to recount stories. Stories may be discredited as experience or folk knowledge, with facts, concepts, procedures, and processes being considered the true learning material. Piaget describes three types of knowledge: physical, logical-mathematical, and social (Lee, Driscoll, & Nelson, 2004). Story knowledge would fall under the social category, along with cultural artifacts such as language. However, these types of knowledge may readily work together; stories can be the glue that binds discrete pieces of all three knowledge types together, through which a learner makes meaningful connections to the material and can practice higher order use of facts and concepts.

Allowing learners to share stories can be an important part of deepening student understanding. Learners create meaning both through their interaction with cultural artifacts and through their interaction with others (Stahl, 2006). Thus the negotiation involved in the telling and receiving of story knowledge is part of the learning process. Viewing learning in part as an activity of social negotiation and co-construction of meaning, then, means that having learners engage with multiple perspectives at the point of learning will better prepare them for applying the same concepts in the real world. Story can provide facts and concepts embedded in the context of one potential use. Further, stories help learners approximate the intuitive ways in which practitioners draw upon lived experience (Schon, 1983), engaging them in acts of cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989).

Learning stories is not limited to those told by a live interlocutor. Textbooks frequently use brief stories to give examples, but there are limits to the utility of these stories in developing student knowledge. Often but one perspective is represented, and the text cannot respond to questions or engage in knowledge negotiation. A class discussion or activity may be used to challenge a text's perspective, to broaden it, or to add oth-

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