

“What’s your story?”: Storytelling as an affective learning strategy

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Abstract

Given the renewed importance of affective factors in teaching and learning, this paper aims at outlining the contribution of in-class storytelling as a phatic communication tool.

Keywords: storytelling, affective learning, phatic communication

Content delivery and prioritisation of cognitive goals have long prevailed as a foundation for curriculum development and evaluation in university education (Krathwohl, 2002, p.212). However, there is a growing body of literature suggesting that students’ basic psychological needs and attitudes towards teaching and learning must be addressed with the same seriousness (Lujan and DiCarlo, 2017). Such factors as belonging and relatedness within the academic community and rapport between student and teacher, founded no longer on authority and criticism but rather on support and common negotiation of meaning (Lea *et al.*, 2003), are central to current student-centered approaches to teaching and learning (O’Neill and McMahon, 2005).

All these parameters are relevant to ‘affective learning’, i.e. how learners feel while they are learning and how their learning experiences become internalised and guide their attitudes, opinions and behaviour in the future (Miller, 2005). The affective domain – identified by Bloom (see Krathwohl *et al.* 1964) in his extensively-researched taxonomy as one of the three learning levels (cognitive, affective and psycho-motor) – includes not only feelings, values, motivations and dispositions, but also low-level skills, such as the learner’s willingness to engage in voluntary activities (e.g. assisting team-mates in solving problems), or those of a higher level, like integrating a set of specific attitudes into one’s general set of values (e.g. acceptance of professional ethical standards).

Taking into consideration the importance of the affective dimension in promoting positive attitudes towards self-motivated, lifelong learning, in this paper (which I presented at the SHIFT 2018 conference), I will outline the contribution of in-class storytelling as an affective learning strategy, focusing on how it can promote phatic communication, i.e. that aspect of communication that aims not at imparting information, but at conveying social/interpersonal meaning, by keeping the communication channel open (Malinowski, 1923, pp.314-316). Although the perspective adopted here is predominantly interpersonal and communicative, this approach can well enhance the pursuit of cognitive goals (Steidl, 2011)¹, given that there is a strong overlap between the cognitive and affective domains.

Why tell a story?

¹ Employing storytelling as an instructional strategy for delivering content in various modules presupposes a more specialised methodology. For details, see Andrews *et al.*, 2009.

Storytelling is a uniquely human interpretative act of communication, having served for thousands of years as a sense-making apparatus for everyday events, life experiences, thoughts and feelings (Bruner, 1991).

In-class storytelling, more specifically, presents multiple advantages: it attracts students' attention, creates motivation and fun, stimulates creativity and engagement and enhances communicative skills (Mokhtar *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, it can activate strong interpersonal bonds of intimacy and familiarity – raising empathy, helping students to understand others' experiences and world view and also functioning as a powerful tool in conflict-resolution and crisis-management. Overall, in-class stories contribute to constructing a collective identity of belonging, solidarity and interconnectedness (Morais, 2015; Olson, 2015).

How can I employ stories in my class to enhance phatic communication?

Stories used for affective purposes may derive from a variety of sources, such as the universal inventory of famous narratives (parables, myths, fairytales etc.), real-life stories (breaking news, celebrities etc.) and personal anecdotes (students love to learn details about the tutor's family and professional life experiences).

I offer here some indicative outlines for experiential activities that may serve as an inspirational springboard for integrating phatic storytelling in the classroom; each example is generic and may – for phatic communication is, by its very nature, cross-curricular – be applied to subjects across the curriculum.

- 1) **Icebreaker activity:** Self-disclosure both on the part of the tutor and the students can serve a bonding function. Instead of merely introducing ourselves on the first day of class, we may narrate a story which is important to us and illustrates who we are, asking students to do the same. Alternatively, we encourage students to choose something significant to them – a particular word or phrase, say, or some lines of poetry, a song, a favourite book or a mass-culture hero – and then to explain to the group its private importance. The point is to lead them to open themselves up to the group by sharing something personal and thus to make a statement of identity.
- 2) **'First impressions always matter':** In order to probe the spontaneous reactions of students towards the subject at hand, the tutor asks them to narrate a story that encapsulates their experience of, for example, Mathematics, History or Political Science. If the majority of the narratives are loaded with fear, anxiety or indifference, then the tutor may be facing a serious case of subject-related anxiety, a finding which cannot be ignored in the long run.
- 3) **'Post your story' – Social media narratives:** New media technologies make it much easier to bring stories to life and have become an increasingly-significant part of participatory, popular culture, especially among the young. In-class activities – like 'Narrate a story which you recently posted on Facebook and explain the reasons for doing that.' or 'Write a short intro for your LinkedIn profile in the form of personal narrative.' – may narrow the distance between academic and real life and also provide a perfect opportunity for addressing issues of self-presentation and impression management on social media.
- 4) **'Let's laugh!':** Humorous narratives create a positive atmosphere; using jokes and funny stories makes learning more enjoyable and thus promotes in-group solidarity (Mora *et al.*, 2015). However, one should be very careful where appropriateness and

politeness considerations are concerned. It goes without saying that self-criticism and self-deprecation are the safest form of humorous discourse.

- 5) **Communicating values:** Stories, as metaphors for life, are useful in communicating values in an implicit – rather than annoyingly-didactic – manner. For example, if the tutor wanted to stress the value of the cooperative principle, the parable ‘Heaven and Hell’ (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005) would be a perfect example for sharing with the students.
- 6) **‘The crystal ball’:** A teacher, as any leader, has to prepare learners for future action or change. A narrative like ‘On finishing my studies I can imagine myself... Complete the story.’ can help students become acquainted with such various future alternatives as imagining the long-term consequences of their actions or picturing the contexts in which they will find themselves working.

Summing up

My presentation at SHIFT 2018 aimed at showing how storytelling, used as a phatic communication tool, can elicit purposeful emotional involvement and bonding opportunities, transforming the university classroom into a participatory, interactional network of interdependent individuals.

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