



Let Me Tell You a Story: Enhancing Teaching and Learning through Personal Stories



Good teaching requires a special blend of the personal and the professional. Although there's a fine line between revealing a piece of oneself to build rapport and sharing too much information, sharing past experiences—telling personal stories—is completely justified when it furthers learning and fosters a positive and engaging environment in the course.

Over the years of my academic career as a qualitative sociologist, I've integrated various forms of stories into my sociology and criminology lectures. Storytelling as a form of transferring knowledge has a long and venerable history. For centuries, the oral tradition of storytelling was the mechanism used to pass knowledge from one generation to the next. Before there were pens and paper, chalkboards and whiteboards, overhead projectors and PowerPoint presentations, ePortfolios and flipped classrooms, there were stories.

After all, who doesn't like a good story? Although I might use movie-clips, newspaper stories, historical accounts, and passages from novels to enhance the classroom learning experience, for me, by far the most challenging and rewarding form of storytelling involves sharing stories from my own experiences.

I use personal stories in all of my classes, but I use them most often in my second-year course, Young Offenders and the Law. You see, in my younger days I was what would now be identified as an "at-risk youth." My stories from this time range from minor social deviations, such as my first underage drinking experience at a high school dance, to more serious breaches of the law, including stealing records from music stores. I tell these stories because I can tie them directly to sociological theories of deviance (social bonds theory, differential association theory, social learning theory, etc.), and the social institutions (family, education, peers, media, religion, etc.) that students are reading about and discussing in lectures. Just like the use of movies and video clips, my personal stories serve as examples that connect course concepts and ideas to real-life experiences.

Students report that they enjoy these glimpses into my past and claim that the stories enhance their learning. Their positive reactions support my belief that what these stories bring to the student learning experience is multidimensional and corresponds with the literature on narrative theory and storytelling in classroom settings. Let me explain.

Benefits of storytelling

First, storytelling provides a change of pace. It mixes up delivery of the material, and provides a break in the lecture, seminar discussion, or group work. Stories capture students' attention and help them focus on the lesson at hand. They may also get students thinking about the topic in a different way. As with most people, students associate stories with entertainment. You can sit back, listen, and let yourself go wherever the story takes you—the material comes alive. Second, stories build relationships between teachers and students. Telling a personal story creates a strong connection between you and your students. This rapport makes the climate in the classroom positive. It's hard to share your experiences without showing your passion—what's important to you, why you care so much about the content in the course. Students genuinely enjoy catching a glimpse of the human side of their professors.

Third, storytelling encourages students, even those who normally do not participate in class, to share their personal experiences and explore how what happened to them relates to the course material. Sometimes students share their experiences in class, other times they'll open up during an office visit, or they may share their stories with others outside of class. Sharing *your* personal experiences inspires reciprocity and helps create an atmosphere where students are more willing to share, not just their stories, but their opinions, insights, and questions.

Finally, and most importantly, personal storytelling facilitates learning. That's what students regularly tell me on their course evaluations. They believe the stories made the material, especially the more abstract or theoretical material, easier to understand. Stories can be powerful in their capacity to link theory and real-life situations, making the theory recognisable. A story humanizes concepts and theories that when first encountered seem too scientific or esoteric. For example, I can define and explain hegemonic masculinity and some students will get it; but if I illustrate it with a story about my high school football days, almost all of the students will relate to the story and they'll remember what hegemonic masculinity entails.

Neuroscience has found that images produced from a story produce a sensory experience that make the recall of information much easier. Through stories, students can take concepts, data, and facts that might seem disjointed pieces of information and tie them together in one mental image. This traces all the way back to John Dewey who equated lived experience with learning that's meaningful and lasting. We need to think of our students' own lived experiences as a foundation for their learning.

A word of caution

Of course, there are limitations and problems associated with storytelling. Inappropriate stories run the risk of delegitimizing the role of the professor. Personal information shapes students' perspectives of you, not only as a professor but as person. Students often put their professors on a pedestal as exemplary human beings and some personal stories may contain information that makes it difficult for students to look up to their professors. My bad behavior as a youth happened during another time of my life. If I were still stealing records and shared that with students, chances are good, they would not hold me in high esteem.

Furthermore, too much disclosure or the over use of personal storytelling may serve to breach the necessary barrier between students and their professors. Sharing too much personal information can cause students to become too familiar with a professor. Or, the stories may make students feel uncomfortable thereby inhibiting their willingness to talk with us about content they're having difficulty understanding. Stories should not be told without appropriate attention to the significance and importance of theory, concepts, and ideas we are using the stories to illustrate. Stories should not ever be told if they do not connect with course content. Accounts of experiences that are personally aggrandizing, ones in which the storyteller is always the one who wins, who does the right thing, will more likely impede than promote learning.

Good storytelling takes planning and practice. Instructors should carefully consider each story before integrating it into the course material. Students should be able to quickly understand the purpose of the story and be encouraged to think about how the story relates to the information being taught and to think of similar experiences in their own lives.

When used effectively, personal storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool. Clear, succinct, well-rehearsed stories can create positive learning environments that not only foster and build teacher-student rapport, but also promote learning in dynamic and engaging ways.

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