

Finding Your Personal Stories to Enhance Professional Learning

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Whether in caves or in cities, storytelling remains the most innate and important form of communication. All of us tell stories... Our brains are hard-wired to think and express in terms of a beginning, middle and end. It's how we understand the world. Storytelling is the oldest form of teaching. It bonded the early human communities, giving children the answers to the biggest questions of creation, life, and the afterlife. Stories define us, shape us, control us, and make us...every single culture tells stories.

-Matthew James Friday, "Why Storytelling in the Classroom Matters," *Edutopia*, July 11, 2014

What makes a story a story?

- A "story" is a word picture that demonstrates a general point by describing a specific event.
- Stories follow an arc with a beginning, middle and end.
- All story elements are present (setting, plot, conflict, characters, theme).
- Stories can be short, even 1 minute, and still be complete.

Why stories?

- Telling personal stories is a powerful way to deepen the impact of your teaching by bringing it to life and making it real.
- How stories can be powerful in teaching:
 - help quickly build rapport with participants - empathy, credibility, trust, humanity
 - keep things interesting and can help participants focus or refocus
 - provoke deeper reflection from participants by tapping into emotion.
 - enhance the community in the room
 - help teacher gain clarity around most important teachings
 - provide a way to address negativity gently while replacing it with a positive message
 - **effectively build hope for and belief in positive outcomes**

Powerful Stories:

- The most powerful story is a story from your life with a specific POSITIVE message **where you are the main character**. It is not a speech, editorial or lecture. It involves other people and events, but the focus is on you - your experience(s), feelings, realizations, growth.
- The most powerful story is a story where you can see what you learned from it. You can identify the good that came from the experience. **These are the types of stories that change minds and open hearts** because they model the process of growth rather than just sharing a platitude.
- Finding (and telling) powerful stories involves personal reflection and a willingness to engage with discomfort – pain, anger, remorse, etc. Accessing true emotion is the key to an effective story.

Guiding Questions for Finding and Using Stories

Questions to ask to identify what stories to tell: (from general to specific)

- Why did you become an educator? What's the story?
- In thinking about the work related to the story you want to tell, what's been your best day? worst day? Why?
- So what (about data)?

Questions to ask to shape stories (getting clear on the message):

- What happened that was surprising, unexpected?
- What grabbed me, surprised me in this?
- How was I impacted? How were others?

Questions to ask to about where to insert stories:

- Where does group energy tend to dip?
- What content is dense, abstract & would benefit from a concrete example?
- What may be "button pushing" that could be more easily accepted as story?

Building your story: you can start with the message and build the arc, or build the arc the clarify the message

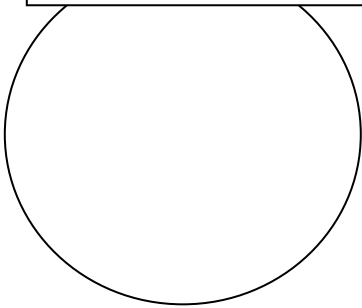
What is the **overall message** you want your listener to get? Remember it should be positive.

Develop the story arc:

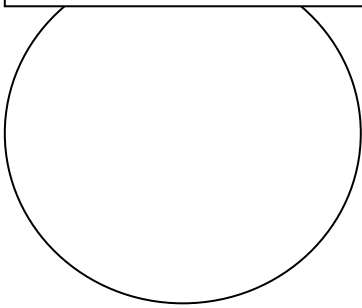
Plot points (people, events):

Key details (emotions, 5 Senses):

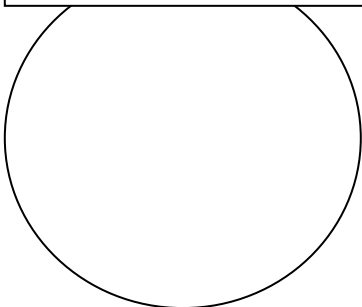
Beginning – set the stage



Middle – encounter the obstacle



End – explore the learning, realization



When working with stories, remember...

- Stories can be short – less than a minute - and still be very powerful!
- It takes time to find your stories. Be patient with the process.
- It takes courage to tell your stories. Ask for support and encouragement when you need it.
- With some stories, especially ones that are painful, you will need to sit with them a while before you can see what they have to teach you, what good there is to share. Honor this and give yourself (and others) permission to share a story only when it's ready to be told.
- It takes practice to get comfortable telling stories. So, practice.
- You may find you need to start by developing longer, more detailed stories, then you can continue to shorten them to the most critical pieces.
- Different people are motivated in different ways. Stories can really help to engage people who are motivated by feelings, relationships, morals or beliefs. Aim to develop multiple stories to address the needs and concerns of different people (different stakeholder groups, people motivated in different ways).
- Stories aren't a substitute for data in professional learning, they make data come alive. Use data and stories together for a compelling call to action.

Sample Stories:

SIM and Algebra 1: I have been teaching at risk students throughout my career. I have used various techniques, such as Kagan, to engage and motivate my students while attempting to keep my classes behaviorally managed. In the past, I have typically written more than 30 referrals on classroom management-based behaviors, such as insubordination for not following directions to work on class assignments or talking during delivery of lessons. However, I have found that by using CER's my classroom management and student engagement has increased substantially. I focused on a class of students who needed to pass the algebra 1 EOC as a retake. My most difficult students are participating and actively engaged in the learning process through the use of frames and organizers. I have also seen scores improve on assessments and greater confidence on work being attempted. The surprising take away from my experience using CER's is that my students hold me accountable for using the frames and unit organizers. Students have remarked how they like the structure of the unit organizers and frames for studying because it breaks down information in smaller, important parts. Further, the use of unit and course organizers has helped me be better planned and efficient in delivering course standards. My referral numbers this year are the lowest they have ever been. I have written 6 referrals and none for classroom management or procedure. All my students have been working as instructed and expected. I noticed that student engagement was much higher, and their organization was much improved. I am certain this contributed to the success I saw on my students' ability to meet the Algebra 1 requirements and pass. 18 of the 19 students showed significant improvements on the standardized tests and my class average was higher than I have ever seen.

Janice's SIM story: "Why do we need to learn this? This is stupid." How many times had I heard that in my 30+ years of teaching? Too many to count. But in my last year in the classroom, it felt like a daily refrain. I had spent most of my career working with students who struggled – academically, behaviorally – students who didn't always see how education could make a difference in their lives. But I knew it wasn't their fault. They hadn't had equitable access to quality learning. So, I was used to going the extra mile, coming up with out of the box ways to help my students WANT to learn. But now I was working with students who struggled more, academically, than any of my students had before. None of my tricks seemed to work. I was at a loss! I knew I was missing something. I knew I needed something different – something that would address historical inequity and build a bridge for them. But I JUST couldn't figure out what that was! And it was causing me to lose faith that I could make a difference. Maybe education wasn't the powerful force for justice I had always believed it to be.

But, before I abandoned a 20-year mission, I decided to give it one last try. I changed things up and accepted a job as an instructional coach. Two weeks into that role, I attended my first professional learning session for the Strategic Instruction Model, aka SIM. Fifteen minutes into that PD, I was head over heels in love. WHERE had this been hiding? I knew in my gut this was exactly the lifeline I needed in my last classroom. Still, my training as a scientist compelled me to confirm by gathering evidence. I'd heard that as a new coach, I could build relationships by asking to "borrow" a classroom to try out something new. This way I could not only model a new strategy but also model that I was continuing to learn and hone my craft. I borrowed a 10th grade Biology class to use a Content Enhancement Routine called the Unit Organizer. Most of the students in the class were underperforming by assessment standards and NOT particularly excited about school. Despite my clunkiness as a novice SIM implementer, the students really responded to it. "Miss, are we going to keep doing this?" "I don't know, do you think we should?" "Yeah, it helps." Now if you're not fluent in teen speak, "it helps" might sound like faint praise. But if you are fluent, you know "yeah, it helps" is at least a 4-star rating! As I suspected, this SIM stuff had juice. The more we used it, the more the data trended upward. And my belief that schools can make a difference and that I could be a part of that was restored. I became a SIM Professional Developer. This connected to me to an amazing and dedicated group of educators in the Florida and National SIM Networks who were also passionate about making a difference for students. I took a job with SPDG to share SIM across Florida. And now everyone who knows me knows I can't have a SINGLE conversation about education without bringing up SIM.

10 years later I continue to see increases in student performance and confidence because of SIM. I warn teachers that once they start using SIM, their students won't let them stop. And I continue to see SIM reignite passion and hope in educators, just like it did in me. It's not a silver bullet, like exercise equipment it only works if you use it. But if you are ready for powerful tools that help students WANT to and be ABLE to learn, then you want to check out SIM.