

Teaching as Storytelling: Bringing Interest Back to the Classroom

“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?”—
Hamilton, Lin-Manuel Miranda

We’ve all been in many classrooms: high school history, undergraduate math, graduate level humanities, theatre, philosophy, biology, etc., etc. Look back through your educational career. Who were the teachers who made a difference? Who were the teachers who stick out in your mind as really engaging the younger you? Think of their style, their approach, and their general classroom behavior. While you are thinking, I want to share a story with you.

I have a two-year-old daughter. She’s very bright, but as of yet, she has not started speaking. I can ask her to identify shapes (up to and including a pentagon, hexagon, and octagon), colors, animals, and even foods, and she will gleefully point out the correct object. However, getting her to actually say those words has been a no-go. Several months ago, we started reading her a nighttime bedtime story. Who doesn’t enjoy a good night-night story, right? She, of course, has her favorites, chief among them, the Dr. Seuss book, *Go Dog Go*. If you haven’t read it, let me assure you the character development and turn of phrase is stunning. Every time the dog goes...so does my heart.

After the third or fourth time I read *Go Dog Go* to my daughter, she started pointing out the dogs on each page. “Yes,” I would assure her time and time again, “Those are dogs.” The book is forty pages long with multiple dogs on each page...and she pointed out Every. Single. Dog. The next time we read the book, she pointed to the dog on the first page and said, “Dog.” She then proceeded to point out every dog on every page and say, “Dog.” Every. Single. Dog.

At least she said the word...a lot. She had learned something.

Have you been thinking about your teachers?

What did you notice about them? I’d be willing to bet that each one of those teachers had a great deal more in common with fireside storytellers than the typical idea of a college professor. That cartoonish lecturer with a dry, dusty delivery, patches on his jacket, and dates littering the blackboard has become an oft-referenced stereotype, with good reason. As you wandered down memory lane, looking at your academic career, did you happen to revisit any of those lectures? You know the ones: Dr. B. Oring McLotsOfDates, standing in front of a room full of sleepy students, droning on and on about a battle that happened forever ago; or Ms. Threepointonefour Mathington, filling

the board with numbers and equations with no regard for students’ actual attention levels. We’ve all had them, and I am sure we all strive to not be them.

The problem is, it’s an easy trap to fall into. We teach the same information semester after semester, the same numbers, the same dates, the same theorems, the same exercises. It can become second nature to simply relay that same information. So, we tune out, and our students pick up on our cues and they tune out as well. We need to remember some simple truths to change this behavior.

As teachers, we are lucky. I know it is easy to look at the size of your paycheck (especially as an adjunct) and disagree with that statement, but I stand by it. We are lucky. Our job is to take something that we love and share it with people who are just starting to decide what it is that they love. This is an amazing opportunity to fill the world with more love for our subject.

The number one comment I get on my teacher evaluation forms is some version of the following: “He’s so passionate...when he tells these stories, he really cares about what it means.” I teach theatre and acting. I know that my students enjoy the interactive acting exercises we do in class. The majority of these comments, however, revolve around my relaying of theatre history. The “boring” stuff tends to be the thing that my students (non-major community college students, mind you) find most interesting. They ask questions and they want to know more about it. They are actively engaged in things that happened hundreds and hundreds of years ago. “History,” as I tell them, “is not over. It is still being told.” Those things that happened so long ago shape us; they inform our current landscape and the way we live our daily lives.

I am proposing only what my students have said to me on numerous occasions—we should not give lectures, we should tell stories. Dates are important, of course, but hoping our students remember cold hard facts should not be the end result. We should be more interested in our students being able to tell a story about the subject and how it affects their everyday lives. I am more interested in my students being able to tell me what Shakespeare brought to the evolution of theatre and did for the publication of plays than I am in them knowing the date of his death or the date that the First Folio was published. The truth of the matter is, if the story is told in an engaging manner, students will remember those numbers anyway.

Understandably, many will look at this concept of teacher as storyteller and dismiss it as “not applicable” to their particular discipline. Admittedly, it is much easier to apply storytelling to history, theatre, and philosophy than it is to STEM subjects. However, this does not mean it cannot be done. If the story is not immediately apparent

in your field, look into your own history to find it. What originally caused you to have such passion for the subject when you were in school?

Find that through line: What is the plot of the Pythagorean theorem? Who was Pythagoras and how/why did he come up with the equation? What doors did it open in learning and society? Or, is it debated...did the Babylonians actually come up with it? That's intrigue, drama...a STORY! That story, if we tell it with the passion that originally brought us to the subject, can ignite curiosity in even the sleepest of 8:00 a.m. students. I once had a student excited about the first use of vanishing point perspective on a backdrop in early stage design. Why? Because I told her that it was the beginning of the story of 3D on stage and film. Suddenly she was looking for the threads throughout the rest of theatre history, trying to find and follow the story of modern 3D film from historical vanishing point perspective.

Sometimes all that is necessary is to start the story for our students, give them the beginning and the ending and let them fill in the holes. By employing this approach, we give them the opportunity to be Indiana Jones and follow the clues that our various disciplines have provided to flush out the narrative. Being told a story is engrossing. However, living and discovering a story, a technique often used in video games, is even more exciting. The narrative slowly unfolds and requires the player to piece together the clues or play through the experiences to build a clearer picture of the story. In an age that is so connected to technology and screens, we usually complain about video games taking our students' attention. Instead of complaining, maybe it's time we use some of the techniques these games are teaching us to take our students' attention back.

Other forms of media have started using the storytelling approach, as well. Recently, there has been a slew of "biographies" told in the "fictional" novel format. The story of Theodore Roosevelt was told in a trilogy of novels by Edmund Morris; the story of the American Revolution has been wonderfully told by David McCullough; and even the story of Alexander Hamilton was adapted from a book by Ron Chernow into a hit Broadway musical, using hip-hop to tell the story. There seems to be a recent awakening of the grand tradition of storytelling and the pop arts. I think that all of our classrooms need a good dose of storytelling and the pop arts. Somewhere along the way, it seems we started to take ourselves too seriously and the subjects we teach became sacrosanct. Too sacred to treat with the "frivolity" of storytelling, the things that we are most passionate about became old and dusty to us, and in turn, to our students. I believe it is past time to revive the real stories behind the things we love and teach.

There is an even more important aspect to this style of teaching than just engaging our students, although that is extremely important. We owe it to those who have paved the way in our unique disciplines to remember their full stories. The theories they developed and the doors they

opened were and are important and they need to live on. However, the reasons WHY they developed those theories, the sacrifices they made, and the journeys they went on to discover them are too important to lose.

We stand on the shoulders of giants when we stand in front of our classrooms and share our love for our subject. If we ignore the stories of those who came before us, we are giving permission for those who come after us to ignore our stories. We have built an amazing story on this planet; it would be a shame if future generations only knew the dry facts and not the amazing adventure.

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