Communicating in the Workplace

Administrative Accounting and Bookkeeping Program

Handout 2B: Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful way to take your communication skills from clear and effective to *great*. As humans, we respond strongly to stories, whether we consider ourselves avid readers of fiction or not. Story is the most powerful way to engage your audience emotionally and make your message more persuasive.

Many, if not most, political and business leaders have been great storytellers — Steve Jobs, of Apple Computer, for example. A natural-born storyteller, he was famous for instinctively shaping any message into a powerful story.

Take the anecdote he tells about a childhood phone call to Bill Hewlett, the CEO and cofounder of Hewlett-Packard (at the time the mightiest of all the tech giants). Steve's purpose is to convey a life lesson he learned as a young man, the sort of thing any leader might share with their staff or students.

Notice how the anecdote starts with a specific setting, as Steve describes the Palo Alto of his childhood. He mentions telling details, such as the fact that even the president of a major tech company had his home phone number listed in the telephone book.

Nowadays, Palo Alto is a major city and a long-established technology hub, but this one little detail helps us imagine what a different place it was back then. Without taking a lot of time, he has begun his story with a specific time and place (setting).

When Steve decides the phone call, notice how he brings the personalities (characters) to life by repeating actual dialogue from the call. Again, this gives our minds the detail it needs to imagine ourselves in the story. It creates an empathetic identification with the young Steve Jobs and his ambitions. This makes the story much more engaging as events develop (plot) and Bill Hewlett not only gives our hero the parts he's asking for, but hires him for a summer job.

So, when Steve restates the message (or theme) of his tale — that you should always take the chance when you see an opportunity — it is much more persuasive than if he just baldly told us that this was a lesson he'd learned this lesson as a young man.

As you can see, this anecdote incorporates all the basic elements of story: character, setting, plot, and theme. These can be incorporated into many messages in your personal or work life to make them more engaging and persuasive.

Storytelling Elements

Character (and Dialogue)

Character might be the single most important element of story. Every good story is built around a good character, and the better the character, the better the story. As human beings, we naturally relate to identifiable and sympathetic personalities more than we do to abstract arguments (no matter how soundly reasoned). We are just better at observing ourselves and other people than at engaging with a bunch of 'factoids.'

So, it's critical that your characters have clear and relatable identities. This is true even in an education or business context, where your characters may not be an actual person. Steve Jobs does an impressive job of this in his Introduction to Macintosh, where he personifies Apple as a scrappy underdog that can spot good ideas way earlier than the giant but clumsy IBM.

If you were to describe your business or other organization, what kind of character would it be?

- A mature, well-established organization that you can count upon for reliable quality, or
- A new upstart in the market offering all kinds of innovative programming?

The main, or point of view character with whom the audience identifies, is the *protagonist*. Most stories will also have an *antagonist*, who opposes the main character. Without a good antagonist, it's difficult to have *conflict* and *tension*, which are what drive many stories forward. Overcoming these is what drives the action of the story (it's *plot*) and leads to a satisfying conclusion.

We learn about characters both through their actions and what they say (*dialogue*). In the Hewlett Packard story, Steve Jobs gives us a fair bit of dialogue verbatim. Which provides a sense of whom these people are, but also paints a picture for us, to put us into the world of the story.

In his Introduction to the Mac, where the characters aren't actual people, we don't have dialogue, but we gain a very specific sense of the various companies' personalities through their actions. (Apple is always innovating and IBM is slow moving and oblivious.)

🎤 *QUOTATION;I think the best stories always end up being about the people rather than the event, which is to say character driven.*
— Stephen King, On Writing

Setting

A good story is set in a specific time and place. This gives the action a specificity and verisimilitude (feeling of truth) that helps the audience imagine it for themselves. Setting can elevate a story by invoking a unique mood or atmosphere. For example, a story about your small-town origins would not only say something about you as a character, but invoke the feeling of limitations you wanted to overcome by going to university.

You want to include enough detail about the setting to conjure it up in the reader's imagination, but not so much that the story stops or slows down too much. The best way to accomplish this is by including small but telling details. A good example is Steve Jobs' mention, in the Hewlett Packard story, that the personal phone number of Bill Hewlett—CEO and cofounder of a major corporation—was in the phone book! Although Palo Alto was already a technology centre, it clearly was still a small town with many opportunities to make personal connections for an ambitious young man like Steve.

Plot

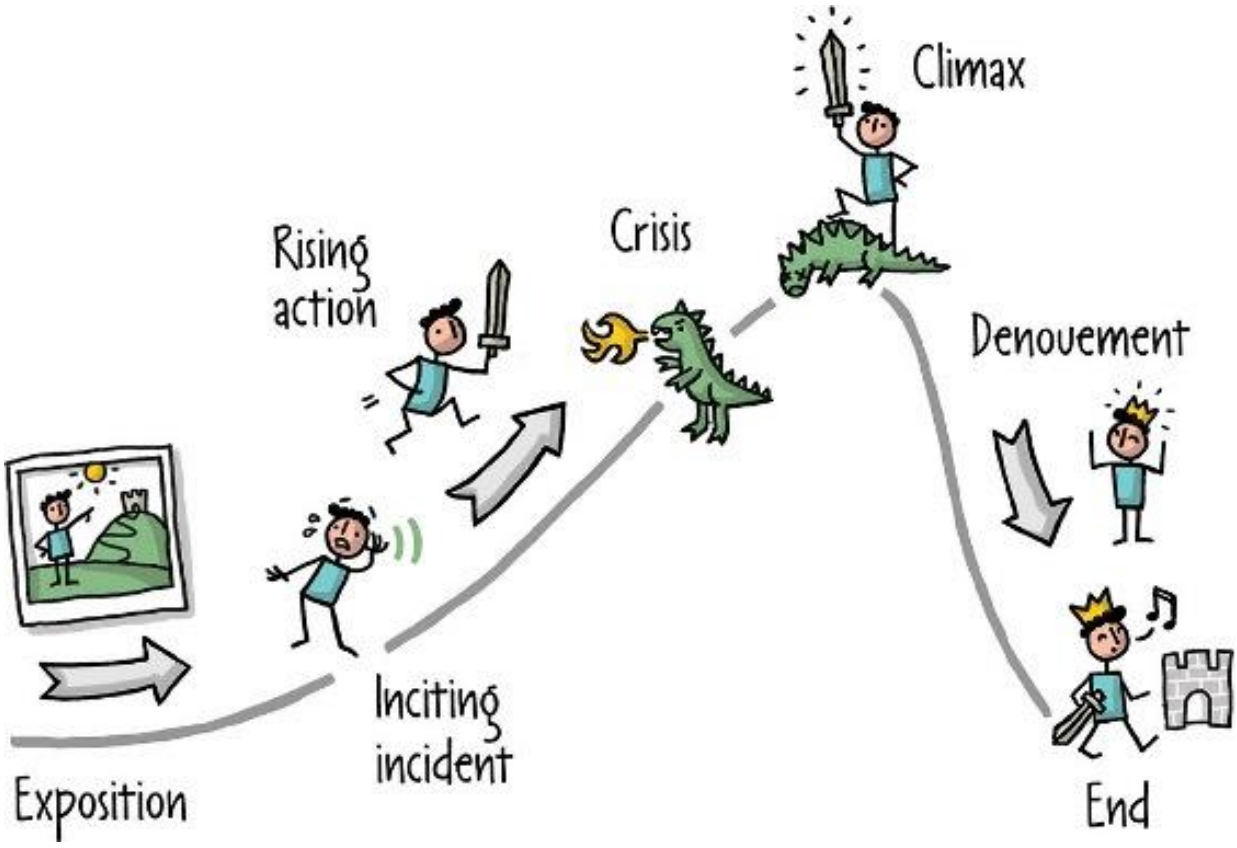
Plot is the action — the events that make up the story. But, a key aspect of plot is that it isn't just one thing after another. In a good story, the action begins because the protagonist wants something or is in a *conflict* with their situation (they need to solve a *problem*). Reaching that goal, or resolving that conflict, is what drives the action and gives the story its shape.

Because plots are made up of a character-driven series of events, they usually adhere to a standard, dynamic structure. The introduction (or *exposition*) sets up the story by introducing the characters and their setting.

An inciting incident then jolts the hero into action. There is a problem to be solved or a personal need that must be met. Then the action rises as a series of complications increases the tension and conflict until a climax is reached and the issue resolved. This can be summarized as follows:

- **Introduction** (we meet our protagonist).
- **Inciting Incident** (the problem or conflict that jolts the story into action).
- **Rising Action** (conflict builds as the protagonist fights the good fight, often with setbacks as well as successes; this builds to a crisis).
- **Climax** (the solution or resolution of our story; the turning point where, when the crisis is at its most intense, our hero wins the day).
- **Falling Action** (where any final details are wrapped up).
- **Denouement** or conclusion (the situation after conflict to show how things have changed).

So, in a good story, one action leads logically to the next. If you've ever sat through a presentation that lost all its energy and dragged because it consisted of several unrelated points, one after the other, you'll appreciate how a good story structure can shape your message more effectively.



Finally, it's possible that the plot can be a series of physical actions — such as the characters arguing — or internal actions, such as a character's decision about whether to take the money or do the right thing.

Theme

Good stories are *about* something beyond their specific subject. They tell us about a specific event and the characters who experienced it — which is what makes them identifiable — but they also have a broader significance. In this way, stories illuminate some aspect of our world and the people in it, leading to a more profound understanding. This is the story's theme or, if you like, its message.

The subject of Steve Jobs' Hewlett-Packard story is a young man calling a big CEO, but its theme is about the importance of taking chances and using your initiative. *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* is about the power of words to deceive. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is about the futility of revenge. His *Romeo & Juliet* is about the dangers of romantic love.

The theme is also often implied rather than stated outright; it's what we learn from the story rather than something a character does or says explicitly. In fact, the most powerful

stories typically leave the audience to draw their own conclusions about the theme on the principle that something you learn for yourself is far more powerful than something you're merely told.

Although the best themes may be open-ended and implied, you—as the storyteller—should be clear in your mind about your theme. It is, after all, the point of your story. A good way to get clear about your theme is to ask two questions: why does your story matter? And, why are you telling it?

Remember that stories become more powerful the more specific they are, and the more particular in their detail. But themes matter because they remind us of truths that are universal and timeless.

Tips for Developing Your Story

Beyond the basic elements of story, outlined in the previous reading, a good, gripping story will emphasize the following elements.

Opening Hook

Begin your story with un unexpected statement or a question that makes people keen to know more. This can be a statement about the setting that causes the audience to wonder what will happen next. Steve Jobs begins his introduction of the Macintosh with the simple statement: "it is 1958." Which makes us wonder: "What happened in 1958?"

He begins his anecdote about phoning Bill Hewlett with the statement, "Most people don't get those experiences because they never ask." Which makes us wonder, "What kind of experiences? What am I missing out on?" A dynamic way to start your story is by asking a question it will (eventually) answer, or by making a bold statement that it will (eventually) explain.

Conflict

Conflict is fundamental for stories to work. It's what builds suspense and tension. Of course, we don't mean a literal fight (though it might be this), but rather anything that opposes the protagonist's goal, and it needs to be significant. Conflict can be emotional or physical, internal, or external… so long as it provides tension that makes the story interesting.

In a sense, conflict can be thought of as the reason for the story. Everything else in the story (plot, dialogue, descriptions, etc.) serves to set up, create, or resolve conflict on the way to the story's resolution. Conflict doesn't have to be purely external, with characters at each other's throats. Internal conflict, where characters in a story are opposed by themselves or a false belief, can be compelling.

Stakes

The story needs investment for the protagonist, which goes beyond their personal needs and expresses the universal human condition. This is usually reflected in the form of what the protagonist might lose. The stakes must be something significant – the stakes need to be high enough for us to care. For example, if the hero does not complete a mission, someone close to them will be killed.

Setting up a story with sufficiently high stakes, you set in motion a ticking time bomb that needs to be solved!

Verisimilitude – Truth

'Truth' in storytelling is felt because a story seems real. We believe in the story and in the characters. This has nothing to do with 'scientific' or 'objective' truth. Truth includes what seems inevitable – it's based on what readers might expect to happen in the story (in terms of the Plot). Or it's based on the 'truths' that the readers believe about the world.

In stories, truth is often about a reality that tells us more about the nature of humanity. Even fantasy or science fiction stories can feel true if they are populated by believable characters who act in recognizably human ways. The principle of verisimilitude says that the reader/viewer should be able to believe the story because of its emotional and intellectual integrity.

Stories work best when they reflect the universal human experience, when they uncover something unfamiliar in what, we thought, was familiar. Feeding our natural sense of curiosity into a thirst for discovery.

🎤 *QUOTATION: A good storyteller does not tell you what to think or how to feel. Instead, a good storyteller tells you the story in a way that allows you to see some truth about the world, about the human condition.*

— Paul Jenkins (The Essential Elements of Storytelling)

The Telling Detail

In a business or office setting, storytelling techniques will make your message more powerful, but you don't want them to make you too long-winded or add a lot of time to your speech. So, to take your storytelling to the next level, you want to become a master of the telling detail. This is a small detail—that doesn't take long to say—but that sparks an image in the receiver's mind or paints a vivid picture.

A good example is in Steve Job's anecdote about calling Bill Hewlett for a favour. Steve mentions that Hewlett's number was in the phone book—even though he was a cofounder and chief executive of a major technology company at the time. With that one detail, we understand how different Palo Alto was like in the early days of the tech revolution and what a small town it still was.

Make it Relatable

The setting, plot, and characters of your story might well be quite exotic to your audience. In fact, it can build interest and intrigue if your story takes place somewhere they've never been. However, your theme or message must be relatable to your audience's needs and wishes — or what's the point of telling them this story? And, there is nothing wrong with restating and emphasizing your theme at the end of the story to emphasize it as a call to action. (Jobs does this at the end of his Bill Hewlett anecdote, where he repeats the importance of always making the call.)

Using Storytelling Techniques in Any Context

Storytelling is a powerful tool to enhance your communication efforts. Here are some examples of how to use storytelling techniques in various situations. I hope these will help you inspire and engage your audience and foster a team spirit.

Articulating Vision and Strategy

As a leader, it's your job to articulate the institution's vision and strategy in an engaging and relatable way. Storytelling allows leaders to translate abstract concepts into tangible narratives that resonate with their audience. For example, instead of outlining strategic goals in a dry, factual manner, you can share stories of successful alumni who embody

the institution's values and goals. These stories make the vision more concrete and relatable, helping faculty, staff, and students to see themselves as part of the larger narrative and motivating them to contribute to its realization.

Inspiring and Motivating Faculty and Staff

Inspiring and motivating staff takes more than just sharing your objectives. Storytelling can show the impact of their work, making it more meaningful and personal. For example, you could include anecdotes about how an instructor's innovative teaching techniques transformed a struggling student's academic journey, or how a staff member's dedication improved campus life. Such stories replace dry statistics with stories that recognize and celebrate individual contributions, fostering a sense of pride and purpose among employees.

Navigating organizational Change and Challenges

Change and challenges are inevitable in any large organization, and it's vital that leaders maintain communication during these times. Storytelling can humanize this, making it easier for the community to understand and accept necessary changes. For instance, if an institution is undergoing significant restructuring, a leader can share stories about how similar changes have led to positive outcomes at other institutions.

However you do it, maintaining communication during challenging times is *vital*. I was a manager once in a unit where a significant financial fraud was uncovered. Very little was said to our staff when the person responsible was removed, and we heard nothing from the College for weeks afterward. In the dark, along with everyone else, I reached out to the College executive to let them know that not knowing what was going on was having a bad effect on the unit—only to be told they couldn't say anything because of the ongoing legal investigation. However, a member of the executive *could* have visited the unit to show support, tell the staff why they couldn't say more, and reassure them with stories about other crises the College had survived.

As it was, the members of the executive used the fact of an "ongoing investigation" as an excuse to not show their faces around the unit entirely. Feeling shunned by the College leadership, and utterly in the dark about what was happening, had a devastating effect on staff morale—many of whom felt they must be under investigation themselves if nobody was talking to them.

Building Relationships and Trust

Building relationships and trust is essential for effective leadership. Storytelling fosters a sense of connection and empathy, making leaders more approachable and relatable. By sharing personal stories and experiences, leaders can break down barriers and create a more inclusive and trusting environment. For example, a leader might share their journey through academia, including the challenges they faced and the lessons they learned, thereby demonstrating vulnerability and authenticity.

Having the self-confidence to honestly share stories about your struggles and failures is vital here. That willingness to be vulnerable is useful to your staff, who may be going through a similar stage in their careers, but vital for building trust.