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The effectiveness of storytelling on adult learning

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Abstract

Purpose – As two doctoral students and adult learners, the authors strongly believe that story telling can be a great tool for educators working with adult learners. The purpose of this paper is to increase awareness of how effective storytelling can be for adult learners.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach of this paper is one of gathering information from literature written on storytelling and adult learning. The paper is designed to introduce storytelling as an effective tool for adult educators while also pointing out the different types of storytelling and its implications on e-learning.

Findings – The findings from the literature review completed confirmed the authors' view that storytelling is effective for adult learners.

Research limitations/implications – Because of the chosen research approach, a more comprehensive qualitative study should be completed to enhance the research on the effectiveness of storytelling on adult learning.

Practical implications – The paper gives insight as to how some organizations are using storytelling, types of effective storytelling for educators and also the implications of storytelling on e-learning.

Originality/value – This paper provides resources and information for adult educators and organizations to enhance or implement another way of instructing adult learners. The focus of the paper is to get adult educators and organizations to use storytelling as part of the learning process.

Keywords Storytelling, Adult learners, Adult education, E-learning, Case studies, Role play, Experiences, Learning

Paper type Viewpoint

Storytelling

Once upon a time . . ., the catchphrase that has been ingrained in the minds of us all since the earliest years of our lives; a catchphrase that excites the imagination and sparks the innocent curiosity of all ages; furthermore, it is the words that follow that famous catchphrase that engage the spirit and have the potential to create longevity of thought, compassion, and even learning. In the beginning there was storytelling, and storytelling was with him, and he was with the storytelling. "He said let there be light, and it was so, and he saw that it was good" (Bible, King James Version, Genesis 1:3). Today, educational institutions are beginning to open up the creative gates and implement old fashion storytelling to classrooms and curriculum in higher education.

Fisher (1987) believes:

We tell stories to give order to human experiences and to induce others to dwell in them in order to establish ways of living in common, in intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is conformation for the story that constitutes one's life (p. 63).



Define adult learning

Most of American society looks to the law to define adult; some laws consider a certain amount of adult privileges to be recognized at the age of 18, while other laws delay most adult privileges to the age of 21. Forrest and Peterson (2006) define adults, “Those individuals who have taken on adult roles in society, whether they are the 16-year-old mother or the 87-year-old retiree” (p. 114). Burton (1986) defines learning, “A change in the individual, due to the interaction of that individual, and his environment, which fills a need and makes him are capable of dealing adequately with his environment” (p. 7). According to Lindeman (1926) the approach of adult education, and, or learning explores the situation and not the subject. Adult education is built around the student’s interest; moreover, the value in adult education is the adult learner’s awareness of a significant experience.

Most experiences are shared through story, some long, some short, but always through a story. Mackeracher’s (2004) definition of learning is “a process of making sense of life’s experiences”, he continues, “making choices and decisions as a means of obtaining feedback to confirm or disconfirm meanings and choices” (p. 8).

Jarvis (2006) explores the concept of learning:

The combination of processes whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, and senses): experience a social situation, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into a person’s individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experienced) person (p. 13).

Most adult learners who return to school after a lengthy absence or begin a college education for the first time bring a plethora of experiences and understanding to the classroom. O’Connor and Cordova (2010) studied how adult learners return to graduate school not just for the advance degree, but also because they believe what they will learn will enhance their own self-understanding of society and his or her chosen profession.

Lindeman (1926) states:

Every adult person finds himself in specific situations with respect to his work, his recreation, his family life, this community life, etc. – situations which call for adjustments. Adult education begins at this point. Subject matter is brought into the situation, is put to work, when needed. Texts and teachers play a new and secondary role in this type of education; they must give way to the primary importance of the learners (pp. 9-10).

Andragogy

Referring back to the story of the handsome young student, when he returned to college to continue his education he sought after a more learning centered, relevant, and a mutual dependence between professor and the student. This is andragogy: the art and science of helping adults learn; “The antithesis of the pedagogical model” (Holton *et al.*, 2005, p. 61).

Knowles continues to elaborate on andragogy:

Our position is that andragogy presents core principles of adult learning that in turn enable those designing and conducting adult learning to build more effective learning processes for adults. It is a transactional model in that it speaks to the characteristics of the learning transaction, not to the goals and aims of that transaction (Holton *et al.*, 2005, p. 2).

Knowles' (Holton *et al.*, 2005) andragogical model is: the need to know; the learner's self-concept; the role of the learners' experience; the readiness to learn; orientation of learning; motivation.

Effectiveness of story telling

Generally speaking, the longer you live the more stories you will have to share with others. Individuals, families, and organizations all have stories that can be communicated to evoke humor, caveats and knowledge. Most of all it expresses who we are and how we think. Benhabib (1999) states, "Storytelling functions as a sense making device, and individual, social, and group identities derive from telling stories" (p. 353). Bird (2007) adds, "Stories not only help us make sense of the actions of others, they serve to shape our own identities" (p. 316).

Michelle Kaminski is a labor educator who facilitates an adult learning course that teaches leadership to union women. It is important that Michelle finds the most usable stories and has developed two main criteria for a good story.

Kaminski's first criteria:

The story must be related to the goals of the class. For the women's leadership class, I typically select stories in which a woman is the main character and which have an obvious connection to one of the stages of leadership development (Eaton and Kaminski, 2003, p. 75).

Kaminski's second criteria:

The best stories are ones in which the main character is facing a choice in which all the practical courses of action have both pros and cons. The character's decision should not be an obvious one; the best stories are ones in which the listener cannot easily predict what happens next (Eaton and Kaminski, 2003, p. 75).

Kaminski concludes by saying, "All participants tell their stories to the whole class, making this knowledge available to the entire class", she continues, "It is not dependent on random conversation over coffee or dinner, but is incorporated into the structure of the class" (Eaton and Kaminski, 2003, p. 76).

A fictitious book or novel can become an effective educational tool when it is applied to an appropriate subject matter and can assist a student's learning process as well as provide a creative outlet for expression. A good novel is just not for English courses anymore, but can now be applied to a business, management, or even an accounting curriculum. Crumbley *et al.* (1998) emphasize three primary goals for using educational novels in the accounting classroom:

The first goal is to reinforce and expand the student's knowledge of technical subject skills. Complex textbook material can often be illustrated through the scenario unfolding in the novel. Information becomes practical as human agents use it to solve problems (p. 184).

The second goal is based on the assumptions that the novel being used will contain accountants who are the key good guys in an interesting, work-related scenario. If so, the novel can enhance the student's image of the accounting field (p. 184).

As the third goal, a novel can be used to present current issues, such as ethics. A goal for the accounting profession is to get ethics out of the headlines and into the classrooms. Novels can aid in achieving this goal (p. 184).

Although storytelling has been around for a very long time, it has not really been used as an effective tool in organizations until more recently. According to Gardner, “the artful creation and articulation of stories constitutes a fundamental part of the leader’s vocation” (Weissenstein and Gardner, 1995, p. 43). Using storytelling as a leader in an organization can help the organizations communication. In an article written by Barker and Gower (2010), storytelling can bring swift communication to an organization. This swift communication can foster a symbiotic understanding among all participants from a cognitive and affective standpoint, leading to behavioral actions that benefit the organization. These benefits include improved understanding of and participation in the organizational culture, increased cohesiveness among team members, and higher quality relationships among both internal and external members. By raising the overall quality and timeliness of information exchange in the organization, it can help lead to more effective and long-standing business relationships both within and between organizations – a significant pathway to garnering strategic competitive advantages in a global working environment (Beckett-Camarata *et al.*, 1998). Generally speaking, the longer you live the more stories you will have to share with others. Individuals, families, and organizations all have stories that can be communicated to evoke humor, caveats and knowledge. Most of all it expresses who we are and how we think.

Schools/organizations using storytelling

“Storytelling in organizations is a powerful tool for communicating complex ideas and persuading people to change” according to Brown *et al.* (2005). Brown and three other authors wrote a book titled: *Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling Is Transforming Twenty-first Century Organizations and Management*. In this book the authors also state “that storytelling gets people to work together, share knowledge, taming the grapevine and dealing with rumors, communicating who you are, transmitting values, and leading people into the future”. In the education arena there is a strong belief and push for storytelling, but the book written by Brown comes from an outside of education perspective and states the benefits of storytelling in other organizations. “Storytelling creates a community of practice in the workplace. Stories help you learn how to understand people’s motivation in your place of employment – your community of practice” (Brown *et al.*, 2005 p. 62). These four authors are not professors or work in education but all have successful careers in other fields. Neither of these authors thought that they would use storytelling in their daily jobs, but it has been more and more of a tool in their corporate positions. “Yet each of us became convinced that [...] storytelling played an enormous role in the modern economy and in organizations in the public and private sector – the serious aspects of twenty-first century life” (Brown *et al.*, 2005).

Storytelling is a lost art that many organizations do not use or promote. In Annette Simmons’ book (2001) titled *The Story Factor*, a story is defined as a “narration of a sequence of events that stimulates a visual, sensory, and emotional experience that feels significant for both the listener and the teller” (p. 41). She believes that storytelling is a way of “reconnecting people to their wisdom” and as a means of escaping the “tyranny of agendas, objective measures, and outcomes [that] has distorted our ability to do good work” (p. 42).

Types of storytelling

Experiences

Arguably, the role of the learner's experience from Knowles andragogical model can be the paragon of adult learning theory. Knowles emphasizes:

The richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves. Hence, the emphasis in adult education is on experiential techniques – techniques that tap into the experiences of the learners, such as group discussions, simulations exercises, problem solving activities, case methods, and laboratory methods instead of transmittal techniques (Holton *et al.*, 2005, p. 66).

Forrest and Peterson (2006) stated, "Because andragogical teachers assume learners have experiences, use of such experiential knowledge is necessary for the education process to be effective. Experience becomes the text book" (p. 118). Knowles (Holton *et al.*, 2005) believes experience is about self-identity with an adult learner; a child learner's self-identity comes from his or her family structure and environment; Experience is something a child learner explores, oppose to an adult learner where experience is who they are.

Ultimately, experience is the adult learner's story; therefore, when an adult learner is expected to share his or her experience they are sharing their story (Sankowsky, 1998). The attractiveness of using experience is the ability to correlate it with new information; teachers can make connections between the new information and what the adult learner already has obtained through his or her experience. Mallinger (1998) believes the adult learner sharing experience makes them a more active participant which can conjure enhanced learning in the classroom.

Role play

Along with sharing experience in the form of story, another vehicle for effective storytelling in adult learning is role-play. Cousins (1999) emphasizes that role-play is an effective learning technique when a student can take on a role in a fictional situation and utilize his or her knowledge and experience. John W. Lloyd (1970) Professor of Economics at Northern Illinois University defines role playing:

An action-spontaneity procedure which takes place under contrived circumstances. It has three general classes of purpose: (1) Diagnostic – to provide better understanding of the role players by seeing and hearing them in action; (2) Informative – to inform the auditors and spectators how certain roles should be filled; and (3) to provide the role players with knowledge and skills by permitting them to experience a near-veridical situation and to understand themselves and their behavior better through feed-back information (p. 104).

Lloyd used role-play as an effective tool to teach collective bargaining to his students. Along with Lloyd there are other educators who have recognized the use of role-playing and other method under the topic of story or scenario. Crumbley *et al.* (1998) present how the scenario principle through student role-playing enhances student's communication, creativity and interpersonal skills: "This is due to the fact that students are either reading about or portraying characters interacting, formulating solutions to dilemmas, putting textbook information into practice and, hopefully, enjoying the process" (Crumbley *et al.*, 1998, p. 184); furthermore, Cumbley *et al.* emphasize the three primary goals for using student role-playing in the accounting classroom:

First, role-playing enables students to practice their interpersonal and teamwork skills. The role-playing assignment is a team effort; students should co-operate with each other. The team is responsible for collaborating on a script, rehearsing, determining props, and filming the scenario on location (p. 188).

The second goal of role-playing is to improve the student's oral and written communication skills. Much has been written about the inadequate communication skills of accounting graduates. The team makes a presentation with the objective of communicating some accounting information to the class (p. 188).

The third goal for role-playing is for the process to be enjoyable while also being educational. Video role-playing has the potential to stimulate student enthusiasm for the class and, if it does, the instructor is likely to be more effective in his or her teaching role (p. 188).

Case studies

The final vehicle for story telling is the use of case studies. Wynn-Williams *et al.* (2008) express, "Case studies are believed to be a superior vehicle for promoting commercial realism, helping students to connect discipline-based knowledge with practical situations, and, more generally, bridging the gap between university and professional life" (p. 114).

Biggs (1989) makes a strong case for case study in higher education by emphasizing four elements which enhance a more deep elaborative learning and skill development:

- (1) Motivational context, learning activity, interaction with others, and well-structured knowledge base. Motivational context "addressed through the use of real-world scenarios as the basis of study, providing a dimension of realism that is often lacking in traditional structured learning approaches" (p. 44).
- (2) Learning activity, "cases encourage active involvement in the learning process; they promote the use of judgment in resolving uncertainty, thereby generating deeper understanding" (p. 45).
- (3) Interaction with others, "cases provide opportunities for active and interactive consideration and discussion of issues" (p. 45).
- (4) Well-structured knowledge base, "cases move the focus from procedures and practice to concepts and issues" (p. 45).

Implication of storytelling for e-learning

The implication of story through e-learning is significant to adult learning, considering many adults are learning via electronic and corporate universities. Beamish *et al.* (2002) defines e-learning as:

A wide set of applications and processes allied to training and learning that includes computer- based learning, online learning, virtual classrooms and digital collaboration. These services can be delivered by a variety of electronic media, including the intranet, internet, interactive TV and satellite (p. 105).

Through many of these electronic learning management systems, adult learners can communicate story through experience on a discussion board; when an instructor submits a topic that requires responses from the learner. Instructors and, or professors can upload a video on a Sakai site that tells a visual story. Moreover, some learning

facilitators may choose to attach case studies or recommend articles to be read through blackboard that will deliver a story that correlates to the current topic of study for a particular week. The flexibility that comes with e-learning allows adult learners to self-direct their studies to suit their personal needs when it comes to learning through a good story. Galagan (2000) mentions how, regardless of time and place, flexibility through e-learning offers adult learners a great advantage if you are a geographically dispersed employee, working non-standard hours, or work from a home base, or anyone working beyond the formal boundaries of their organization or university. With these adult learners who have some much workplace experience, learning through story will assist the learning process in the face of such geographic and time challenges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of story is an effective part of the adult learning process in the class room, virtual classroom, and in the workplace. Adult education is built around the student's interest; moreover, the value in adult education is the adult learner's awareness of a significant experience. This experience can be used to contribute to a learning centered environment through andragogy, the art of helping adults learn. Furthermore, role-play, case studies, articles, or just a good old fashion novel that correlates to the present topic within the appropriate curriculum, creates an effective and lasting impression on any learner, especially the adult one. Finally, there will be tremendous continuous progress with the use of story among adult learners through a variety of learning management systems: discussion boards, Sakai sites, and blackboard assist the learning process for those adult learners who face geographical and time management challenges. There will always be significant changes in the forms and technology we use to communicate story; however, one thing will remain consistent: the use of story to communicate and implement knowledge and wisdom to all who dare to receive.

Once upon a time there was an excellent article written about the effectiveness of storytelling on adult learning . . .

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