STORY TELLING APPROACH - AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING TOOL

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ABSTRACT

I'm sure all of you must have loved that cosy bed with your grandma telling you interesting stories, fairy tales and hair-raising ghost stories. You must have loved how the story immersed you into the kingdom of kings and queens, swept you over the hills, plains and valleys and then gradually taking you into that deep slumber. Times have changed, but the love for stories across the world still remains the same. Even in this age of technology, stories evolve to be one of the most effective tools to teach learners both in a traditional classroom or in the digital environment.

This paper discusses how stories can act as a tool to address problem solving issues or a tool that can bring about a change in behaviour of the learner in an interactive way. Stories have power. Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today —Robert McKee. Great leaders are good story tellers. A story teller uses a clear and simple narrative way to tell its audience- of what they would do, what they want to achieve and why it matters. Each one of us have used this story telling technique to influence our thoughts over parents, teachers, friends and colleagues. Stories are seen all around us and in all that we do. This paper, will discuss how the potential of story-telling can be tapped to influence the learners in the teaching process in order to inspire and engage them by connecting them to their own lives.

Keywords: Content, Context, Stories, Teaching Strategy, Motivation, Improve Performance, Change in Behaviour

Introduction:

Isn't it astonishing that you still remember those child hood stories told by your friends when you gathered in the courtyard or when you were tucked warm in your bed with a little lamp burning beside your bed and your grandma told you the story of the little giant who scared children away from his garden, of the story that the devil appeared at mid-night, of the story of the wise King who knew how to take care of his people and so on.

Do you wonder how you remember these stories even today, when you must have almost forgotten all those formulas of physics and mathematics, the dates printed on History pages, the acids and bases that combined to make a new element or compound and so o?. This is because those stories have moved you, made you feel alive, and inspired you. Your appetite for stories, is a reflection of your need to understand the patterns of life and connect you emotionally. Maya Angelou once said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." And what's the best way to make people feel? By telling a compelling story. Having the experience of teaching students in both traditional and online environment, I feel that story telling is a very effective approach and suits or can be used for all kinds of learners, both young and adults alike.

Discussion:

Very often students complaint that a particular lesson is dry and boring. No matter how hard you must have tried to prepare and plan yourself to make it interesting, it fails to keep the students motivated and make them sit to listen to what you teach. It is at these times that the regular lecture approach will have to be replaced with an approach that is interesting - this is the story based approach or Story Based Learning (StoBLs). StoBLs is not an innovative tool, but it has been since here since ages. Everyone including adults love its immersive aspect. Begin your class with a story that will relate the concept to the learner's experience and make them feel the relevance of that story in order to persuade them to learn about a concept that is crucial to the learning process. Help learners to integrate knowledge in meaning ful ways in realistic context through story telling which will make information easier to remember. Human mind is able to easily remember the gist of a story and its lessons compared to a list of miscellaneous facts.

Historical perspective:

Dated back to the early times, story telling was usually combined with gestures and expressions or as an art form depicted as symbols on caves to help remember the story. Stories have been recorded in the form of art, music, or writing on sand, leaves and rocks.

As alphabets were invented, stories have been recorded in writing form and later recorded as film and stored in digital format. Man has been successful in communicating the stories orally through generations and generations despite the popularity of written or advanced digital media. Most of the stories communicated orally are traditional forms like folk tales, fairy tales, fables, or related to mythology.

Modern storytelling uses the traditional forms and extends itself to represent personal narrative, politics and culture and is widely used to address educational objectives. Story telling requires the auditory and visual senses of the listener that helps them to organise the mental representation of the story and keep them engaged. This helps the story teller to make his stories as a foundation for teaching and learning. Stories encompass a variety of values too, which helps the learner to reflect upon his individual responsibility, concern for the environment and social welfare.

How to write or tell a story?

Story telling requires visualisation. The story teller needs to present and communicate data using elements of story-telling. This visualisation can be integrated into narratives to present data or subject in a structured way. What are these elements? These are: Setting the stage, Creating a problem, Developing Action, Presenting the climax and Ending with a happy note. In all the stories that you have heard in your childhood contained all these elements, which is why the lessons that you had learned with the help of a story has stuck with you and which you shall probably remember all your life. We shall discuss about these elements further in this paper and understand how to integrate these into your topics in teaching.

Advantages of using SToBLs

When to use the story based approach? SToBLs or Story Based Learning can be used when you want to teach principles and concepts and when you want to instill values or find solutions to problems. For example: In an organisation, SToBLs are used to train people on Soft Skills, Leadership Skills, Compliance related regulations, Code of Conduct, Finance, Sales, etc. In a classroom, SToBLs are used to teach students values, problem solving (maths), science and language. We shall look at a few examples in both these contexts which may help you to reflect and try out in your regular teaching.

SToBLs grabs and retains the attention of the learner through out the course or lesson. Learning becomes fun. It establishes the content flow and engages the learner too. It enables high retention of the concepts covered during the course of story-telling.

Example: SToBLs in Organisations

Many organisations are adopting an online platform to deliver training to their employees on soft skills, leadership, communication, sales and code of conduct. Most of their sessions include scenarios or story telling which help the learners to relate their experiences to the context and which helps them to figure out the solution for themselves. The SToBLs has been found to be very effective in training the adults as the stories are in the narrative form and

keeps them engaged and motivated. The learners are able to relate the situation described in the scenario to their personal experiences and hence find them to be exciting. This has also been observed to bring about a change in the behaviours and enhance their learning and retention of concepts learned.

Example: SToBLs in Classrooms

Most of the students fear maths which is nothing but problem solving. Have you ever thought of teaching mathematical concepts through story telling? SToBLs serve as an effective problem solving tool. Try to teach students complex problems through story telling. Engage the learner and motivate to suggest a solution. Show them the consequences of their decisions, how they impact or enhance the situation. By doing so, the learner will understand and try to find out alternate methods to come to the right conclusion. This will not only help the learner to be motivated, but the concept learned through this approach will be registered in his mind for a longer period. The same applies to teaching physics and history. Even language teachers can use SToBLs to teach language and grammar. Stories help students to learn the content, the cultural aspects and to solve every day problems in a very simple way. They also help students to acquire and develop reading skills and creativity. Stories also favour an interdisciplinary and comprehensive methodology. For example, the topic on plants in science can be reviewed in English using a story such as 'Jack and the Beanstalk' .

How to structure the course or lesson to bring to make it relevant to the concept?

Before, we get into this, follow some tips of story- telling.

1. Take on the responsibility of a story teller
2. Start the story earlier than you think
3. Take it slow (Start with one element)
4. Watch great movies

Structuring of Course:

In the organisational context relating to the relevance of the topic or subject: Very often we see that repetitive format of information fails to retain learner's interest. A storyline approach will help to treat the challenges of the content as a problem and outlines a solution through a series of real life situations. An instructional design strategy with SToBLs approach helps the learners to relate the content and apply their learning practically. The thrill of stories is that its set the stage for learning by presenting the characters, the plot, the problem and then asking the learners to find a way out. Let me talk about the SToBLs that I have used in the training context for corporate.

Dr. Reddy's Laboratories is a private organisation. The company wanted a story line approach to teach their company's code of conduct and ethics to its staff in a web based platform. They wanted this because, as part of their job role, employees need to keep the company data safe and protect it. Employees of every organisation face conflicts while dealing with customers, stakeholders and colleagues wherein they will have to face challenging situations and solve problems arising as the outcome of personal interests or individual behaviours. Through a series of scenarios, the learner was presented with a problem and a question that prompted him to take the right decision. The scenarios were weaved in the form of stories such that it appeared as if the learner is placed in the situation and asked what should he or she do to solve that problem or overcome the situation. These scenarios reflected one's own personal behaviours and exposure to real life situations. If the learner (here the employee taking the course) gives an incorrect answer, a constructive feedback is given telling that their decision is incorrect. The course designed concludes with the implications or the outcome of one's behaviours on the organisation and to themselves. Some scenarios, also prompts the learner to rethink about the actions and try again! This kind of approach was very much liked by the organisation and gave an excellent feedback. Similar kind of story telling approach is used to teach employees of various financial organisations like ICICI Bank, Trading Institutions, LIC Agents and so on because this has been found to be more effective and a constructive way of dealing common situations faced by employees and how they should tackle them.

In the classroom context relating to the relevance of the topic or subject: As teachers, we have come across and heard ourselves saying, 'This topic is so boring, dry and uninteresting'. We also think about how could we make dry topics interesting for students, isn't it? Well, story-telling is one of the simplest and powerful tool to your rescue. Try to weave the dry topic in the form of a story. For example: Give life to bones while teaching the topic 'Human Skeleton'. Each bone will speak as if it were a character and how without him the skeleton would be incomplete. This way, the students will remember the names of the bones too and at the same time understand its placement in the overall skeletal structure, functions and what will happen if that bone is dislocated or injured. This form of story-telling can also be used to teach about malaria. For example, two mosquitoes - male and female plan to have a family. They are out in search of untidy and filthy places to raise their young ones. Finally when they find one, they lay eggs and bred thousands of mosquitoes that were responsible to spread malaria in that locality. One day, the mosquito sucked the blood of a man. After 9 days, the person felt totally sick and had to be hospitalized. Here, the students will not only understand how malaria is spread, but also know that unhealthy and dirty surroundings is the cause of spreading malaria. Students will never forget how a mosquito bite can cause death of the person and that he or she needs to keep the surroundings neat and clean. The complete life cycle can be explained through story telling. Learners can be kept engaged by asking

questions in between to find what the problem is how to solve it. Storytelling is an ideal teaching and learning tool, for it takes seriously the need for students to make sense of experience, using their own culturally generated sense-making processes (Bishop and Glynn, 1999). Yet another concept of story telling can be used to teach germination process of a seed. It can be presented as if the seed is a character and how due to the changes in surrounding sprouted up through the soil and grew up.

Post story-telling activity:

After you have read 'The Story of the ....', write down answers to the following questions:

- What would students learn by reading or listening to this story?
- What subject-specific vocabulary has been introduced in the story?
- What aspects of the story would need further teacher explanation?
- What activities can be planned around the story?

Think about the next science / or any subject topic you are planning to teach. Try writing your own concept story to support your students' understanding of the new topic. This kind of approach needs a bit of pre planning and creative thinking to implement in the classroom. But the outcome will be wonderful, enabling long lasting retention of the topic learned.

To tell a story think of:

- Setting
- Event (Problem)
- Development (Action and Consequences)
- Climax (Lesson Learned or Problem solved)
- Ending

Weave your teaching topics around these elements. These elements will guide you to proceed and develop on the story. You can also ask the students to participate and ask what they would do if they were in the shoes of a specific character of the story. Since, this way of asking questions makes the learner a part of the story, he applies his previous knowledge or gains new knowledge as part of problem solving and helps him to learn better.

Although some educators believed that storytelling is lightweight, soft and not a real learning tool. This perception narrowed down the focus on just using it to convey information, express views, share experiences, entertain and connect with others.

Discussion:

In recent years, the reflective movement has done much to advance the notion that we each carry within us creative learning capabilities. Storytelling is one of these capabilities and when it is used in thoughtful, reflective and formalised ways, significant learning is possible (Clandinin and Connelly, 1998; McDrury and Alterio, 2002; McEwan and Egan, 1995; Pendlebury, 1995; and Witherell and Nodding, 1991). When educators support students to share and process their practice experiences in these ways, storytelling can:

• encourage co-operative activity;
• encompass holistic perspectives;
• value emotional realities;
• link theory to practice;
• stimulate students' critical thinking skills;
• capture complexities of situations;
• reveal multiple perspectives;
• make sense of experience;
• encourage self review;
• construct new knowledge.

As teachers we need to promote and use storytelling in a way that will impact on how students perceive its value. Storytelling can be in visual, oral or written forms depending on the needs of the learners. Before introducing story-telling, I suggest to question yourself as I did on:

Is story telling compelling and memorable way of teaching this group about this topic?
What form of story- telling will best suit these learner's needs?
What outcome should I expect as a result of story- telling from the students?
What other support is needed?

Conclusion:

Using Storytelling in teaching learning process helps for sharing and interpreting experiences that can bridge cultural, linguistic, and social needs. It aids to make meaning from experience and to communicate that meaning to others and in the process learn about one self and the world in which we reside. A teacher or story teller can convey ideas and with practice tap existing knowledge of the learner, create a bridge and motivate towards a solution. Teachers may choose to add new elements into old stories making the story correspondent to each unique situation or topic. Stories make effective educational tools because of the active

participation of the learner and enabling them to recollect prior knowledge and connecting it to the newly acquired one.

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