

The ToolBox

VOLUME V ISSUE 3

MARCH/APRIL, 2007

A Teaching and Learning Resource for the Faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University



The Power of Narratives

We each carry with us an assortment of narratives that capture the flavor and essence of our life experiences and who we are as individuals. Consider the power that can emerge from linking the narrative stories of our students' lives with the rich narratives found in fictional literature, poetry, music, movies, historical accounts and, most recently, the new blog culture of the Internet.

The Power of Stories

Stories and narrative, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging to our lives. They attach us to others and to our own histories by providing a tapestry rich with threads of time, place, character, and even advice on what we might do with our lives. The story fabric offers us images, myths, and metaphors that are morally resonant and contribute both to our knowing and our being known (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 1).

Think for a moment about some of the great stories that you have heard over the course of your lifetime. These stories may be recalled from a variety of sources. You might remember the bedtime stories of childhood, a book that you have read, a legendary historical event, a posting on an Internet blog, the storyline of a favorite movie, or a personal account that was shared by a friend. As these stories are told, read, heard, or seen, they carry with them the great potential for impacting us in a variety of ways. Robert Coles, Harvard psychiatrist and author, describes this phenomenon and potential as the "call" of stories.

Stories and narratives, regardless of their source or format, can provide a wonderful way of connecting with students. A challenging concept or complex principle can often be illustrated or emphasized through the power of a story. As we watch the characters wrestle with their own values, engage the challenge of relationships, or weigh the alternatives they might pursue in response to a life decision, we sometimes find ourselves being unconsciously and involuntarily drawn into the tensions of the story and then make connections between those life events and our own personal experiences.

Coles, R. (1990). *The call of stories and the moral imagination*. New York: Mariner Books.

Witherell, C. & Noddings, N. (1991). *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Going to the Intersection

Each of us carry a variety of intriguing and unique personal narratives—the stories of our lives. This reality applies equally to faculty and students. Our individual narratives are in a constant state of development and refinement. As we have new experiences and build and maintain relationships with the variety of people who enter our lives, we can alter our perspectives, examine and modify our personal goals, and learn along the way.

As students enter our classrooms, they also bring along their personal narratives. The ways they view the ideas, concepts, and key principles of the courses we teach are translated through the lenses that comprise their own narratives. This reality provides a wonderful opportunity for learning.

Through structured learning experiences, discussions, and reflection, students can be provided with a means for assessing their own narratives in light of the lessons learned from the experiences, challenges, and insights of others.

As a final thought, don't underestimate the power of your own story as a significant teaching tool. Students are quickly drawn into the story that surrounds the passion that you hold for your discipline and how that passion has impacted the path of your life.

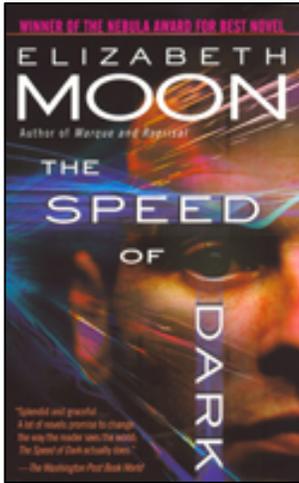


A Rich Variety of Sources for Narrative

There are a variety of sources from which stories and narratives can be derived: Movies, fictional literature, history, internet sources, songs, and television programs. The following are some strategies that you may wish to consider as a means for integrating narrative with the content of your academic discipline.

Fictional Literature

There are an abundance of amazing narratives that can be found in fictional literature. For virtually every academic discipline, there are a number of books, short stories, and poems that can be used to teach important principles. The dilemmas, moral challenges, and difficult decisions faced by fictional characters provide a rich landscape for classroom discussion.



As an example, consider the book *Speed of Dark* by Kathleen Moon. This book is the story of Lou Arrendale, a man with autism. The reader is invited into Lou's world and acquainted with the joys and challenges of his life, the nature of his relationships, and his strategies for addressing the routines and surprises of daily life. Lou, and the other people with autism who work

with him, are invited to participate in a medical "cure" that would allow them to become "normal." This story has possible connections and implications in the fields of education, science, economics, philosophy, theology, and political science to name a few.

In one class that read this book during a recent semester, the students could not wait to discuss what they were learning and observing from the story. Some students even admitted to "cheating" as they had gone ahead and read parts of the book that extended beyond the class assignment. How often have you observed that happening? Pretty exciting stuff.

History

History is often a study of the headlines that surround the great events of the past: dates, times, and key historical events and characters. As we all know, however, there are a number of personal interest stories and narratives behind those headlines. Consider using journals, personal letters, and other first person sources to illuminate the people behind history and the types of challenges they faced as individuals in making difficult life decisions.

Internet Sources

Our students, often referred to as "Digital Natives," have been raised in a technological environment. They are actively involved in relationships through a variety of electronic venues: Facebook, MySpace, and blogs. This can be used to great instructional advantage:

- Create a blog site for your class at one of the many free internet blog sites (e.g., www.blogger.com).
- Use Blackboard (or other electronic classroom management system) to post discussions on varied course topics.
- Ask your students to communicate with you via emails focusing on specific course topics and how they intersect with their lives.

Films and Television

There new films coming out every week. Popular television programs that carry a strong narrative are often a topic of conversation among our students. Capitalize on these strong cultural influences by assigning students to critically review and analyze current movies. Ask them to comment on the film's narratives, their connection with your course content and, of equal importance, how those narratives intersect with their own lives and narratives. Think of this process as three sides of a triangle: 1) The narrative of the movie, 2) The connection between the narrative and the discipline, and 3) The connection between the narrative of the story and narrative of their own lives.

Music

Song lyrics are a rich source of narrative. Music has always been used as a venue for social change. Consider using the lyrics of current songs that are part of your students lives as sources for political and cultural commentary.

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Published by
 Indiana Wesleyan University
 as a resource for faculty.

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 Marion, IN 46953