

Storytelling: Practice and process as non-textual pedagogy

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Storytelling, as a practice and process, is a longstanding tool and non-textual pedagogy in the field of library and information science. Storytelling is also the topic of a graduate course taught for the past eleven years by the author as a tool for all forms of professional communication. This article explores the non-textual (and selected textual) pedagogies involved in teaching storytelling as an interactive communication practice. This pedagogical approach defines storytelling as involving a dynamic triangle of telling, listening, and story, drawing on both folklore and storytelling performance scholarship. Three themes weave throughout the syllabus: ethics, applications, and technologies. Storytelling brings the teller and audience into a reciprocal process of listening and telling, from which a fresh story of professional meaning and purpose can emerge.

Keywords: Storytelling, professional storytelling, communication, listening, interaction

1. Introduction: The storytelling course

Storytelling has come to mean many varied things, but in the field of library and information science it has deep roots as a professional practice of communication and public engagement. For over 120 years, storytelling as a live, oral interpretive art has been a key practice in libraries serving young people. Children's librarians began systematically describing storytelling as a professional tool in the 1890's, although initial descriptions of storytelling in libraries appear as early as the 1870s [4,9]. While much is made of storytelling now in business and marketing contexts, with a strong focus on the persuasive power of story, the professional tradition of library storytelling offers a different perspective. This tradition emphasizes the relationship between the teller and the audience and respect for the story. This relationship occurs in the moment of storytelling, establishing trust and goodwill among those who come to the library to hear stories told and find favorite narratives [1,3,10,11].

Storytelling is a non-textual tool, involving oral communication and aural reception, with no written text between the teller and the audience. I took storytelling as a master's student in library and information science in 1997, and I first taught a version of the storytelling course at the School of Information Sciences¹ at the University of Illinois in 2007. The 16-week graduate seminar course now enrolls about

¹Formerly the Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

20–25 graduate students per section, and our school typically offers 3 sections simultaneously in the spring semester, one on campus and two online. In other words, about 1/5th of each class of master’s students in the library and information science program take storytelling.² Each student tells three stories in class. The first story must be a folktale, told orally without notes. The second must be a social justice story, recorded digitally with audio and video of the teller and slides or images of supporting evidence. The third may be a story from any source, including personal experience, again told orally without notes, but with the option to include digital visual content. The final project for this course is a digital story, created and produced by the student, that brings together all of the learning experiences, textual and non-textual, that have come before.

I define storytelling as a practice involving a dynamic triangle of telling, listening, and story, drawing on both folklore and storytelling performance scholarship. From folklore scholarship, Barre Toelken argues that “all folklore participates in a distinctive, dynamic process” involving “constant change, variation within a tradition.” (Toelken p. 7) In other words, some elements are conserved in retelling a story, while other elements are reinvented with every new telling, for every new audience. Doug Lipman describes storytelling as a triangle, a relationship between three entities: the storyteller, the story, and the audience. Despite the possibility of direct relationships between the teller-to-audience and teller-to-story, he notes that the relationship between audience-to-story is not entirely within the teller’s control, as the audience may or may not receive the message intended. “The circumstance that forces you to be humble is also what makes it so miraculous when you succeed.” (Lipman p. 18) This dynamic triangle, therefore, require storytellers to maintain a healthy respect for the audience [5,12].

The way I teach storytelling has evolved dramatically over the past eleven years. As I inherited it, the course had a strong emphasis on folklore and the wisdom of human story traditions. As I have developed it, the course focuses on professional applications of the practice of storytelling, which I call “storytelling thinking”. There are many potential applications for storytelling thinking, one of which is detailed in a recent publication [7]. Understanding storytelling as a process of communication opens up novel ways of solving communication problems in workplaces. Many resources highlight story a persuasive tool to use to make one’s point more vividly. I argue that story alone cannot have this effect without an active process of storytelling that engages the teller, audience, and tale in a dynamic and interactive process of mutual regard and co-creation of the story. Storytelling, as I teach it, brings the teller and audience into a reciprocal process of listening and telling, from which a fresh story of professional meaning and purpose can emerge.

²I have also served as director of the school’s Annual Storytelling Festival for just over a decade.

Table 1
Course themes in action

Themes	Activities	Assessments
Ethics	1. Lecture: Whose story?	1. Group feedback
	2. Stories told in class	2. In-class feedback
	3. Future file assignment	3. Written assessment and grade
Applications	4. First and third stories told live in class	4. In-class feedback
	5. Storytelling in Professions paper	5. Written assessment and grade
Technologies	6. Storytelling apps posting	6. In-class feedback
	7. Social justice story	7. In-class feedback
	8. Final digital story	8. Written assessment and grade

2. Course themes

There are three themes that weave throughout the syllabus: ethics, applications, and technologies. Students encounter *ethics* in my courses through an ethical storytelling model that I have developed and shared in my workshops based on asking: whose story is it? We explore three answers – an individual person’s, a culture’s, and an institution’s story – as well as relevant practices that will help to navigate ethical dilemmas in each case and when these categories overlap. They are also required to explore their own positionality in relation to stories, understanding something about their cultural identity and how it relates to storytelling ethics [2]. I do not dictate students’ ethics as storytellers, but I require them to understand themselves as tellers in relation to stories they might tell through a collection assignment, the Future File, which requires them to collect 20 stories they might tell and describe cultural origins and their approaches to adaptation.

The exploration of *applications* starts with readings that introduce the ways that storytelling is used in different professions, from social work to radio broadcasting. Students are asked to find further applications and professions that use storytelling for forum postings. A few weeks later, they are required to explore one kind of professional application in depth through their Storytelling in Professions paper. Exploring applications exposes students to an array of ways that storytelling functions as a professional tool, whether the stories told are personal, cultural, or (as is often the case) institutional. Whatever the setting, this theme helps students to understand that storytelling is used in all forms of professional work.

Finally, students are exposed to various *technologies* throughout the course, including digital storytelling and narrative structures. Students are required to record two digital stories, stories recorded as videos, using audio and images together, the first on the Illinois Media Space (<https://mediaspace.illinois.edu/>) platform, and the second on their choice of software that can produce video files with audio. The first system allows them to record themselves as narrators on video, with accompanying images or slides. This highly structured technology gives them a supported form of practice with recording technology. At the School of Information Sciences, we are fortunate to have dedicated Instructional Technology Design staff who help students

troubleshoot recording processes. In addition to digital technologies, I also teach narrative structures as technologies in the old sense of “a treatise on a practical art or craft” to help them understand how to effectively develop their stories [8]. We examine story arc, character functions, plot relationships, and ways to visualize narrative structures.

A more detailed look at a selection of these assignments is available online: <https://storytellingscholar.blogspot.com/2018/08/teaching-storytelling-example.html>.

3. Pedagogy in parallel: Non-textual and textual

Although there is some textual learning through written reflections, papers, and assignments like those for any graduate seminar, the heart of the storytelling course is non-textual learning. With 20 or more students enrolled, and each student telling three stories through the course of the class, most of the weekly 3-hour seminar (2 hours online) is devoted to listening to student tell 3–10 minute stories. To support the 20–25 graduate students enrolled in each section, I assign them to 3–4 smaller rehearsal groups based on the week they are assigned to tell their stories. The groups are required to rehearse together, synchronously, before presenting in class, providing both peer support and further opportunities for experiential learning in the dynamic process of storytelling.

Storytelling as non-textual pedagogy is usually less familiar and can be quite uncomfortable or even intimidating to graduate students. To mitigate anxiety and encourage risk taking, I have one rule that guides how we, as a class – whether on campus or online, large group or smaller rehearsal groups – offer feedback to storytellers who have just told or presented their stories. The rule is: *if you think you have a criticism, ask a question*. In this way, the power remains with the teller who has just shared their story. This rule also disrupts the more usual critique culture and implicit competition between students in graduate programs. I enforce this rule vigorously at the outset, as each student tells their first story and receives feedback from the class. After that time, typically the class has internalized the rule, and they begin to reinforce this rule with each other. This has been the simplest and most effective way to facilitate a productive and critically engaged learning experience.

4. Conclusion

After eleven years of teaching Storytelling, I have begun to take these pedagogical ideas to new audiences. I co-taught a new Data Science Storytelling course with Dr. Matt Turk in fall 2017, combining his expertise in data visualization with my expertise in storytelling practices and narrative structures [13]. (I have begun) to develop definitions of the historical practice of storytelling in librarianship, focusing on the paradoxical tensions between, for example, planning and flexibility, to help

translate this professional wisdom into other professional settings [6]. Collaborative case studies with nonprofits, university Advancement, and user experience groups continue to yield new insights into how to teach storytelling to professionals across the information fields [7]. Most of all, I listen to my audience. Storytelling is only as effective as the health of the dynamic relationship between teller, tale, and audience, or in this case teacher, students, and stories. My students continue to challenge and change my own approaches to teaching the practice of storytelling.

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