

Vivifying Instruction through Story-based Learning

Stories have been the oldest system of propagating information. Storytelling elements, therefore, can be effective vehicles for implementing learning, leading to an innovative pedagogical system called Story-based Learning. This article presents an overview of Story-based Learning.

Once upon a time, as most stories are told, stories were used to entertain and inform people. Whether they were narrated, mimed, or enacted, stories helped to pass on values and beliefs to the next generation. Often, frescoes and sculpture also served as media to help preserve and propagate cognitive patterns of the prevalent society. But the nature and the media of stories have evolved over the ages. Today, visual media such as films often overwhelm the story line, and the impact that computer-generated effects have on the audience was unimaginable just a few years ago.

The stories by Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka present us with a range of human emotions that we may never experience on our own. Their stories discover new dimensions of horror and disgust, exploring emotions ranging from the cruel to the unusual to the absolutely uncomfortable. In recent times, we have Stephen King, whose stories make us fear creaking doors, dark alleys, and even our pets.

Do King and others like him actually introduce us to behavioral patterns? Do writers of horror “teach” us how to get scared? Do their stories tap into our innate fears or do they mold them? Whatever the mechanism, the stories succeed in cultivating fear in the readers, suggesting that perhaps we can use similar elements to teach or evoke behavioral responses from learners.

Stories, however, needn’t always be unusual—they can be realistic and yet inspiring. The scores of biographies and autobiographies that sell do so because they help us discover aspects of personalities that we would like to emulate, and scores of stories of corporate leaders and statesmen continue to mold the younger generation.

From this perspective, can we use stories in teaching situations? Can we use erotica to sensitize employees to sexual harassment? True stories to inspire and motivate learners? Biographies to teach leadership skills to managers? Fables to articulate concepts? Science fiction to introduce systems training? And romance to teach MS Outlook? (Read The Meeting below.)

Understanding the various elements of storytelling and its different media opens up stories for instructional purposes. The storytelling elements can be manipulated to focus on a topic or reinforce a concept, creating perhaps the first approach to an instructional methodology.

From this point of view, stories lend themselves to learning in a manner that is familiar, time-tested, and entertaining. In other words, stories can be “CRUNCHED” (**C**ontextual, **R**ealistic, **U**nusual, **N**atural, **C**oncrete, **H**uman, **E**asily accepted, and **D**iscovery-oriented) into believable, impressionable, and assimilative learning.

In addition to the CRUNCHED characteristics, stories are also impacted by the medium. From the oral tradition of telling stories around bonfires to the multi-million dollar computer game, stories have changed and diversified considerably. Today, almost all forms of media are used for storytelling: the Aesopian raconteur, street plays, stage plays, theater, books, radio serials, movies, television serials, audio books, e-books, computer games, and the like. This evolution of media implies that storytelling elements have become richer, more vibrant, and vivifying.

The Story-based Learning Object

Considering the various aspects of stories and the richness of media available today, Tata Interactive Systems proposes a Story-based Learning methodology. The Story-based Learning Object will use visual imagery and audio to vivify the learning and achieve interactivity in the true sense of the word—beyond mere mouse-clicks and multiple-choice questions. Some of the ways in which this will be done are through agents and artificial intelligence that create branching to help the learner explore alternative possibilities. Instructionally, this has the added benefit of reusability of the learning object.

Story-based Learning appears to work best when you teach principles and concepts that are:

1. Abstract (e.g., Soft skills and Leadership)
2. Colorless or Uninteresting (e.g., Regulations and Code of Conduct)
3. Difficult to appreciate (e.g., Finance for non-finance managers)

Furthermore, Story-based Learning Objects are effective teaching tools because stories facilitate the appreciation of inaccessible concepts by lowering resistance to new ideas. Story-based Learning Objects also make the tedious memorable, concretize abstract notions and unravel complex ideas by making use of story elements in an instructionally structured manner.

Components of a Story-based Learning Object

The Story-based Learning Object can be constructed around two broad structures, the meta components and the media components. The meta components provide the basis for the instructional design and the media components help create the presentational interface.

Meta Components

Theme: This is the moral of the story or the “talking point” that constitutes the story. It can be used to determine the resultant mood of the learner.

Plot: This provides the learning object its opening act, sets up the conflict, builds up to the climax, and finally provides the resolution. These familiar components of a story provide the semantic structure of the learning object.

Characters: The learner identifies or empathizes with the story’s protagonist and internalizes the experiences of the characters. It’s also possible that the other characters and the support cast reflect the learner’s sub-personalities or the characteristics that the learner finds inspirational.

Tone: The tone or flavor of the Story-based Learning Object can be derived in accordance with the conventional

classification of stories. Categories such as Horror, Humor, Tragedy, Romance, Thriller etc. can help create the backdrop that makes the story interesting and immersive.

Media Components

Text: Narration, dialogue, and external commentaries form the basic elements of a Story-based Learning Object.

Images: Photographs, illustrations, animation, and video can augment the learning experience by providing visual relief and breaking the monotony of reading. They also appeal to other senses, and, instructionally, they broaden the scope of implementation of instructional material.

Interactivity: Branching and alternative decision-making paths provide a conceptual level of interactivity as opposed to conventional interactivity that is merely physical. This also enables the learner to explore different possibilities.

Sound: Audio, sound effects, and especially music cater for the “musical intelligence” of the learner and increase the impact of the instructional material by addressing multiple facets of intelligence.

Instructor/Narrator: This is essential for Instructor-led Training material and for intertextual explanations, and provides authenticity and credibility.

So far, instructional designers have been regarded as teachers and trainers. Perhaps, with Story-based Learning Objects, they can graduate to being storytellers who set the plot, visualize the screenplay, create the characters, pace the action, and choreograph the learner’s emotions to achieve an instructional paradigm that is as new as it is old.

A Story-based Learning Object can be created by aligning storytelling elements with instructional design methodologies. The following example attempts to demonstrate that even software skills, such as using the Calendar function of Microsoft Outlook, can be taught through stories.

The Meeting

“Use Microsoft Outlook,” barked the system admin guy and hung up. After six painstaking months working as Junior Business Manager, Dwight needed this meeting to ensure the smooth passage of his proposal. He was not as young as the other business managers and not as aggressive either. But what he lacked in terms of social skills, he made up in earnestness and sincerity. Age had its advantages, however few – but knowing a lot about Microsoft Outlook was not one of them. He couldn’t use the intercom; it would take too much time calling 20 people. He also had to apply finishing touches to his proposal. “How am I going to ensure that they are available? And I have only 2 hours!” he wondered, and blurted, “What am I going to do?”

"Pardon me, were you talking to me?" asked Sue, who happened to be passing by. "No, I'm trying to set up a meeting, and I have to do it fast." "Use Microsoft Outlook." Dwight sighed, "Yes, that's what the system admin guy said—not a syllable more." Sue flashed her usual, benevolent smile. Dwight could never figure out whether it was maternal or simply friendly. He hoped it wasn't maternal—Sue was at least seven years younger than him. "Let me show you," said Sue, adding, "Microsoft Outlook has a Calendar, which checks availability, sets the meeting, and even reminds the invitees!" She pulled up a chair and sat close to him. Dwight was going to enjoy his learning.

This example shows how:

- The learning objective can often be presented verbatim,

using dialogues.

- Words such as "barked" set the mood and initiate action for the unfolding of the story.
- The main characters or protagonists can have characteristics that map to the learner's profile.
- The learning occurs in the resolution of the story when Sue offers her help.