

Storytelling: the Secret to Impacting & Influencing Young People

6 keys to unlocking the persuasive power of narrative

By Michael McQueen



Seen in every culture, used throughout the centuries and understood from even the youngest age, stories are a powerful tool for teaching and learning. Great leaders in past eras have built empires, founded religions and inspired nations by the stories they have told.

Similarly, when it comes to engaging Gen Y, never underestimate the power of narrative. A postmodern group like Gen Y are nowhere near as interested in whether something is *right* as they are in whether something *works*. The best way to show that a principle, a truth or a lesson works is to place it in the context of experience - through stories.

In his book, *The Heart of Mentoring*, David Stoddard affirms this point. He says 'Principles communicated through story have a far more profound effect on people and their lives than ideas presented outside the scope of human experience'.

Stories connect with a postmodern mind-set because they illustrate a principle in action while leaving interpretation and personal application in the hands of the listener. Instead of dictating truth, you are simply illuminating a principle through experience and allowing the listener to attach their own meaning.

If you want to truly engage Generation Y as a teacher or a parent, you can no longer see yourself merely as a messenger delivering information. Your background, your history and your stories must become the centrepiece of your message. The old adage is true - the most significant lessons in life are better caught than taught. Teaching through narrative is the most effective way of helping young people to 'catch' the lesson you are trying to get through.

When I started speaking to Gen Y students over five years ago, my approach was to outline two or three ideas of content and then throw in a story for good measure. The general format of my sessions followed the familiar pattern of content/content/story. It didn't take me long to figure out, however, that this approach wasn't working. Students would switch off within ten minutes and getting them back became an almost impossible task. It seemed that no matter how hard I tried or how many PowerPoint images and videos I used the only thing they listened to was the stories. Whenever I would start to tell a story the engagement and connection was palpable.

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Recognising this, I started to design my content around stories rather than my stories around content. The general format became: story/story/content. It worked! I started to elaborate on the stories by adding more colour, more emotion, and more of myself. I found that even in the toughest schools, infamous for disinterested and disengaged students, I could spend an hour speaking to 100 Year 10s and have them entranced the whole time. Their teachers were astonished. They had never seen their students silent and attentive for more than two minutes, much less a whole hour.

The secret was simple - I became good at telling stories!

Good stories make an impact. They are memorable and fun. Even from your own perspective as an adult learner you probably know this to be true. Think back to a conference or seminar you have attended recently. If I asked you to recall one thing about each of the presentations you heard at that event, what would you remember? It probably wouldn't be the PowerPoint slide charting statistical trends nor the seven-point strategy that promised to solve all your problems. In most cases you probably wouldn't even be able to recall the name of the speaker.

What you are almost certain to remember is one or more of the stories that the presenters told. The young people you are aiming to connect with and inspire are no different.

For parents, storytelling is vitally important. You may have noticed how quickly your child will shut down when you give judgements and suggestions. The minute they feel that you are offering advice or directives, this group will disengage almost immediately. You may be surprised, however, to realise that while young people may resist your judgement, they are very interested in your *journey*. They are fascinated by your stories - even if they don't show it. They love to hear what you did, why you did it, what you learned and what you would change if you had your time again.

Whether it be regarding career choice, relationships, smoking, the traps of car finance, the importance of study or any number of other important topics, try the approach of telling your son or daughter a story rather than simply offering advice.

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One of the challenges that many parents face in telling their stories is to find the appropriate time, context and tone to do so. If this is the case for you, start by writing your stories down. I make this suggestion because you may find that the moment your son or daughter is ready to listen to, and learn from, your stories occurs years or even decades after the moment you are ready, willing and able to share them.

The tragedy here is that only 4% of people ever take the time to sit down and record their stories. So often, we figure that we will get around to doing this one day but for too many people, that day never comes.

Regardless of whether you write your stories down or would rather look for opportunities to share them in person, here are some suggestions and guidelines for communicating through narrative:

1. Be authentic and honest. Embellishments, half-truths and a positive personal bias will alienate Gen Y. For greatest effect, share the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth - warts and all. Also, be aware of the rose-coloured glasses syndrome. Try to remember events and experiences exactly how they were for you at the time, not with the benefit of hindsight and selective memory.

2. Beware of sharing that is self-indulgent and self-serving. Ask yourself if the story you are sharing is really designed to benefit the listener. If the purpose of the story is self-serving and designed simply to shock, impress or intimidate the listener, you will find that the narrative will be counterproductive in achieving cross-generational engagement.

3. Aim to promote growth of understanding for shared experience not to manipulate or convince. If there is a hidden agenda to the story, young people will sense it a mile away and immediately develop distrust and suspicion.

4. Be strategic by telling stories pre-emptively. It is important to tell stories that model a principle or lesson just before it will be needed by the listener. This is particularly important for parents telling their teenage children stories designed to help their kids make wise choices at certain life stages. For example, sharing your experiences relating to binge drinking and drug use would be useful when your children are age 13 or 14. If you share the story much earlier than this age it will seem irrelevant but if you share it much later once experimentation may have already begun, it could come across as contrived or manipulative. Sharing a story and teaching a principal just before it is needed requires a degree of sensitivity and discernment on the part of the parent, teacher or employer. Planting the 'seed' of an impacting and timely narrative in the fertile soil of a young person who is ready to receive it is vital to the effectiveness of the story.

5. Don't read your experience into someone else's. Beware of the temptation to assume that you know how somebody else feels simply because your story or experience may be similar to theirs. Share your experience by all means but allow the listener to make the connection of commonality without pre-empting it.

6. Get to the point. In using narrative to convey a principle or model an idea effectively, it is vital to use language that creates a mental image for the listener. The human brain thinks in pictures and so developing the scene, the emotion and the context of a story is all part of the art form. However, it is important that the methods of the narrative don't become the focus. When telling stories, be careful to make sure you get to the point relatively quickly while still making the journey one that interests, entertains and engages your audience by helping them touch, taste, feel and experience it.

If all this talk of telling your personal stories is a little uncomfortable, you may prefer to leverage the stories of history, people you have known, and even examples from contemporary popular culture. Whether the stories you tell are your own or not, you will find that narrative will be far more effective in communicating a principal or illuminating consequences than a well-worded sermon will ever be.

For teachers, you will be amazed at how interested your students are to hear about you, your life and your experiences. The very fact that you are a real person with a real life and real stories will amaze them no end.

In the classroom, the stories you tell will go a long way towards creating memorable learning experiences for your students. Furthermore, sharing stories is a powerful means of building the authenticity and rapport that provides the foundation for an engaging relationship.

Beware, however, of falling into the trap of only telling the stories that paint you in your best light. As teachers, parents and managers, you have probably learned most from your mistakes. Likewise, the young people you are aiming to connect with will probably learn more from your shortcomings than your triumphs. Don't be afraid to share your stories of failure, weakness and humanness. Your successes may impress the younger generation but the stories that depict the real you will be the ones that truly impact them.

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Michael McQueen is a 3-time bestselling author speaker and social researcher.

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