

“Here there be dragons:”

Navigating the waters of information literacy through storytelling

Presented at the 40th Annual LOEX Conference, May 3-5, 2012
by Megan E. Welsh, MLIS Candidate, University of Denver, Denver, CO

Once Upon a Time... A brief history of storytelling

In the beginning was the word or, more accurately, the logos. And in the beginning, “logos” meant story, reason, rationale, conception, discourse, thought.
-Walter R. Fisher, 1987

Storytelling, a definition:

• “the entire context of a moment when oral narration of stories in verse and/or prose, is performed or led by one person before a live audience” (Pellowski, 1990).

Theories on the Origins and Purposes of Storytelling (Pellowski, 1990):

- Storytelling grew out of self-entertainment.
- Stories satisfied the need to explain the world.
- Storytelling developed from an intrinsic need to represent, honor, and interact with supernatural forces.
- Stories originated because of the human need to communicate experiences with others.
- Storytelling satisfied an aesthetic need for creative expression.
- Storytelling originated to preserve the deeds of ancestors and convey history.
- Stories codified societal norms.
- Storytelling serves the purpose of educating.

Storytelling as an Instruction Method

Information has value only for the moment it is new, but storytelling is capable of releasing information even when the story is very old. -Anne Pellowski, 1990

- **Where does knowledge come from?** Fisher argues that, as humans, our understanding of the world is derived through our interactions with it; we are a small part of a larger story (Fisher, 1987). Knowledge is constructed through narrative.
- **Why should storytelling be used in instruction?** Since engagement in a broader narrative is a part of human experience, narrative should be used as a means of educating students. It is a meaningful method of constructing knowledge. Storytelling, when used as a means of teaching may improve students’ recall, ultimately affecting learning (Oaks, 1995; Fawcett & Fawcett, 2011; Steslow & Gardner, 2011).
- **Definition of storytelling as an instruction method:** when a “teacher takes the material to be learned and either presents it as a story, places it within a story, or illustrates it with a story or stories deliberately chosen to aid in the comprehension and/or recall of the information”(Oaks, 1995).

Tips and Tricks

Whoever dares to tell a story must bear in mind that the story is an essential part of our humanness. But of course it had better be an engrossing, well-told tale as well.

-Jane Yolen, 2000

1. Evaluate your uniqueness. Everyone has their own storytelling style based upon their own personalities and experiences. Embrace yours! (Chambers, 1977)
2. Find good stories. Write down and remember your experiences and those of your colleagues.
3. Prepare your stories. Just like preparing a lesson plan with outcomes and objectives takes time, so does practicing and integrating stories into your class.
4. Build rapport with students and the professor at the beginning of or even before the class. Whatever you do, do not ALIENate your students (see Figure 1).

Storytelling in the Library Instruction Classroom

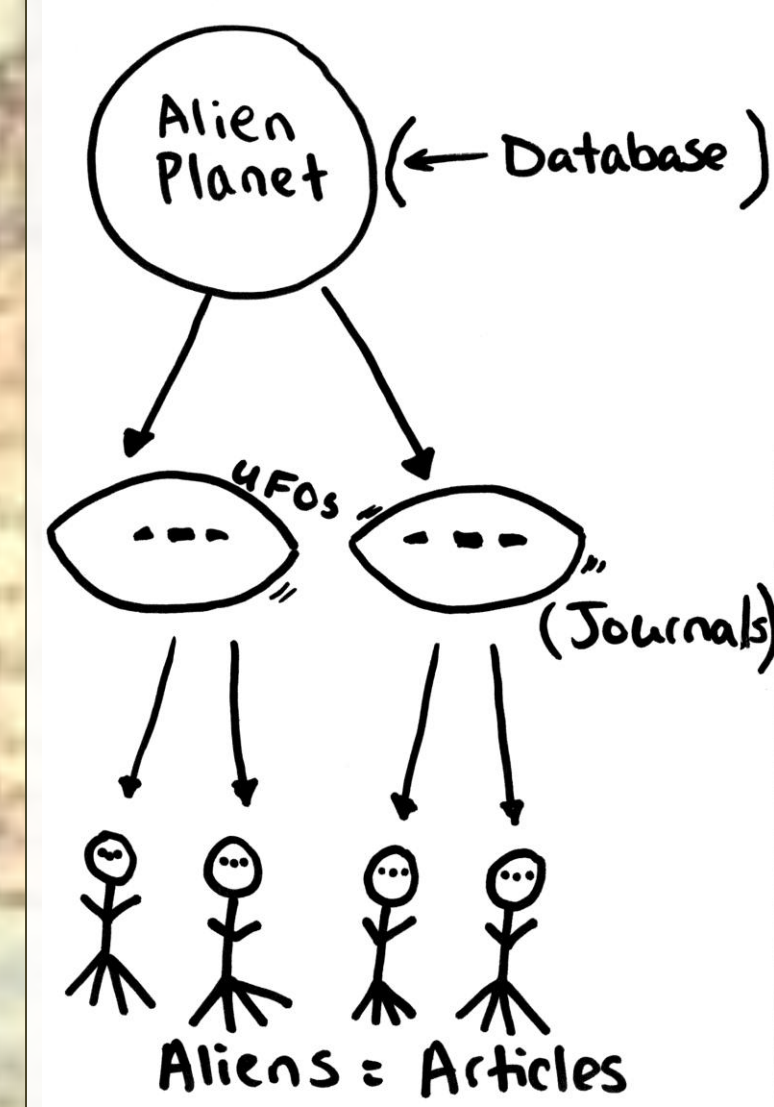


Figure 1: Diagram illustrating the relationship of a database to articles. Drawn in a library class.

Storytelling in the library setting serves a dual purpose:

1. It builds rapport between library staff and students
2. Storytelling can increase retention of instructional material

Personal Examples:

- “Introduce” students to George Boole (see Figure 2)
- Share frustrations and successes of past research (misspelling keywords and my favorite reference desk story)
- Personalize by explaining my background as a Pre-K teacher
- Use analogies like the aliens as articles example (see Figure 1)
- Use interesting keywords, like “pirates,” to highlight how to construct search strings

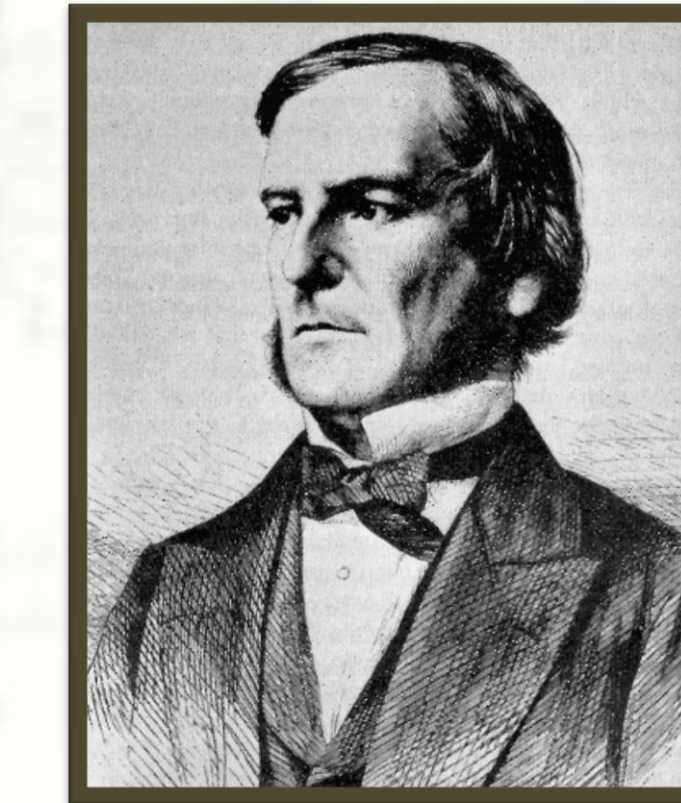


Figure 2: Image of George Boole used to personalize the concept of Boolean Operators (Wikipedia, 2012)

Conclusions

- Storytelling is an underestimated, though timeless, instructional strategy that should be employed in library classes.
- Techniques for incorporating storytelling into library instruction classes should be investigated.
- A study on the impact of storytelling on the retention of information and the information seeking behaviors of college students is needed.

Sensations become words; language develops

Lyre of Ur depicts storytelling, c. 3000 BCE

Westcar Papyrus indicates Egyptian storytelling, 2000-1300 BCE

Evidence of storytelling in Indian text, 500 BCE

Early Greek writings depict the act of storytelling, 400 BCE

Tales of bards recorded, 60 – 1000 CE

Dissemination of stories in printed form due to the invention of the printing press, 15th century CE

Jakob (1785-1863 CE) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859 CE) collected and published stories

Story times held at the Hartford Public Library, 1880

More than 50 storytelling manuals published in the U.S. between 1900-1975

Storytelling used in library instruction classes

References:

Chambers, D. W. (1977). *The oral tradition: Storytelling and creative drama* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers.

Fawcett, S. E., & Fawcett, A.M. (2011). The “living” case: Structuring storytelling to increase student interest, interaction, and learning. *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 9(2), 287-298.

Fisher, W. R. (1987). *Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press.

Oaks, T. (1995). *Storytelling: A natural mnemonic*. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation). UT Knoxville Library, Knoxville, TN.

Pellowski, A. (1990). *The world of storytelling*. Bronx, N.Y.: The H.W. Wilson Company.

Steslow, D. M., & Gardner, C. (2011). More than one way to tell a story: Integrating storytelling into your law course. *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, 28(2), 249-270.

Yolen, J. (2000). *Touch magic*. Little Rock, AR: August House Publishers, Inc.

Background image entitled “Universale Descriptione di Tutta la Terra Conosciuta Fin Qui” courtesy of Flickr user Cea.

Contact information:
Megan E. Welsh
MEWelsh@gmail.com
(518) 435-5740