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Thoughts on Storytelling (With a Few Stories Thrown In!)

Why should you care about storytelling?

We've been telling stories to entertain and teach, reinforce cultural rules, pass on spiritual truths, expound on political and judicial criticism and form community for about 27,000 years. We've been telling stories since our cavemen ancestors decided meat tasted better after it was cooked but fire could burn you.

Man grew up on stories, literally. And the human brain is specifically wired to receive story. In a semi-miraculous, scientifically verified interlocutor neural coupling between speaker and listener, we listen to and receive story with our entire brain and even produce oxytocin while listening to a story, that's how much we like it!

Storytelling and Orality in the Ancient World

The mass printing of books began in Asia around 868 AD. Prior to this time, all books were painstakingly hand-written by scribes. The lack of systematic literacy education and the limited availability of manuscripts, even for the elite who could decipher them, made oral storytelling and public rhetoric the mainstay of information dispersement in ancient cultures

"Neither the Greeks nor the Romans came anywhere near

to completing the transition to a modern kind of written culture. They relied more heavily on oral communication than has generally been imagined." *Ancient Literacy*, W. V. Harris, Harvard University Press, 1989

"We now know that less than 10% of the ancient world could read or write. Early manuscripts were more like musical notation than what we think of as literature. These early writings weren't meant to be read, they were meant to be performed and heard, like music." *The Biblical Storyteller*, Tom Boomershine, Ph.D., United Theological Seminary

"The subject of the relationship between speaker and audience takes up much of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*." *Rhetoric and Irony: Western Literacy and Western Lies*, C. Jan Swearingen



We've been telling stories for about 27,000 years. We've been telling stories since the cavemen found out meat tasted better cooked and fire could burn you.

Storytelling and Language Development

According to 2012 figures from UNESCO, over 775 million adults worldwide are still illiterate (www.uis.unesco.org/literacy). Entire regions of Africa, Asia and the Middle East still

have storytelling as their primary communication medium.

The single greatest predictor of adult educational and career success is early exposure to language. The ability to use language effectively allows an individual to navigate life effectively by communicating with others, whether orally or through written means.

Babies and toddlers who hear stories develop an early love of language, words and imagery which gives them a leg up on reading and writing while children who lack early exposure to stories are severely at risk in the educational system (www.zerotothree.org). Hearing stories also develops critical listening skills, another important component in educational success.

“Stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better remembered, than simply stating a set of facts.”
Paul Zak, Ph.D.

What Science Says About Why Storytelling Is Effective

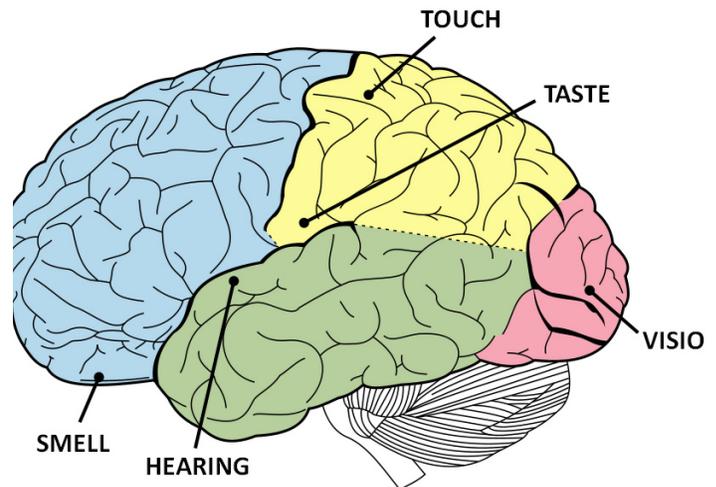
“As social creatures who regularly affiliate with strangers, stories are an effective way to transmit important information and values from one individual or community to the next. Stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better remembered, than simply stating a set of facts.” *The Moral Molecule: How Trust Works*, Paul J. Zak, Ph.D.

“We used the speaker’s spatiotemporal brain activity to model listeners’ brain activity and found that the speaker’s activity is spatially and temporally coupled with the listener’s activity. This coupling vanishes when participants fail to communicate. Moreover, though on average the listener’s brain activity mirrors

the speaker’s activity with a delay, we also find areas that exhibit predictive anticipatory responses. We connected the extent of neural coupling to a quantitative measure of story comprehension and find that the greater the anticipatory speaker–listener coupling, the greater the understanding. We argue that the observed alignment of production- and comprehension-based processes serves as a mechanism by which brains convey information. The greater the extent of neural coupling between a speaker and listener the better the understanding.” *Speaker–Listener Neural Coupling Underlies Successful Communication* Abstract from the *Proceedures of the National Academy of Sciences*. Uri Hasson, Neuroscience Institute, Princeton University

Storytelling Accesses Sensory Receptor Sites in the Brain

Brain imaging studies have shown the areas of our brain responsible for sensory processing and imaginative process fire when listening to story. Here is a map of those areas:



Storytelling is a Powerful Communication Tool

For all the reasons discussed here and during the lecture, storytelling should be in your communication toolkit. Using storytelling can improve your writing and communication skills, help you form community and communicate persuasively not only in your college work but in your personal life and career.