

# STORYTELLING

boosts learning in the classroom



## STORYTELLING

- Creates a stronger connection with students
- Relaxes students and lowers barriers
- Engages and holds the learner's attention
- Gives difficult concepts real context
- Makes facts more memorable
- Encourages students to share their own experiences

Stories exist in **every culture**



When we hear **FACTS** only our language processing centers activate


When we hear **STORIES** multiple areas of the brain are activated



Whether the story is **HEARD, READ, OR WATCHED** our brains are activated just the same

stories alter our

## BRAIN CHEMISTRY

**OXYTOCIN**   
(social bonding) increases feeling of empathy when we relate to characters

CLIMAX



**CORTISOL**  
(fight or flight) puts us on high alert as conflict arises



**DOPAMINE**   
(rewards) is released if we enjoy the story outcome

EXPOSITION

The arc of a good story keeps us hooked

RESOLUTION

# TIPS for using stories in class

Use **real stories** that students will find relatable

Don't be afraid to **include emotion**



**Test out stories** to make sure they are effective

Make sure there is a **clear, beginning, middle, and end**

**Keep it simple** to hold focus and make it memorable

Great stories can come from **experiences, news, history, or pop culture**



Have a **strong opening** to grab their attention

Include stories that **use images and data** to improve critical thinking skills

Have a **strong character**



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# Using Diverse Narratives and Storytelling To Help Create A More Inclusive Classroom

Students are entering today's classroom with a diverse range of backgrounds, beliefs, experiences, and opinions. According to a 2016 report from the U.S Department of Education, since 1980 the share of white undergraduate enrollment declined from 81 percent of total enrollment to 55 percent in 2014. Over that same timespan, the undergraduate enrollment continued to rise steadily for black, Hispanic, and Asian students. And to get a glimpse of the future, we need to look no further than students under the age of 18. By 2020 the U.S. Census Bureau is projecting that half the nation's school-aged students will be part of a minority race or ethnic group.

Diversity in class extends beyond race and ethnicity. Gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, physical ability, beliefs, and cultural heritage all contribute to the rich diversity in classes today. That diversity enriches the educational and social experiences for most students. But there is also the potential for under-represented groups to feel excluded. One unexpected potential source of marginalization may be found in students' course materials.

“Most of the material has nothing to do with African-Americans, Hispanics, just mainly white people...the only way on campus that you can really learn about a different race, is, just, taking African-American studies and different classes just for that race.

—Student Participant in

*Voices of Diversity* study, Caplan & Ford 2014

## Course Materials Need to Keep Pace

In the recent Harvard Voices in Diversity Project, researchers interviewed students at four different college campuses across the United States. The primary focus of the study was to examine the positive and negative experiences of women and students of color at predominately white campuses. Many of the students interviewed shared that they frequently found examples of racism and sexism in their course materials. In some



examples the bias was a result of omission, simply not providing a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds in the assigned readings. But a few students believed that some of their course content was implicitly biased in its language and presentation.

Some students also reported that they felt that the perspectives of their race or ethnicity were not included or valued in lecture and class discussions. These feelings of exclusion can have negative consequences for all students.

## Marginalization Leads to Negative Consequences

Research has shown that students who feel that their views are not represented or valid in a course may become less motivated to actively participate in class. According to a recent study published in *The Journal of Higher Education*, it may also impact cognitive development. The researchers in the study *Engaging with Diversity: How Positive and Negative*

*Continued on reverse...*

*Diversity Interactions Influence Students' Cognitive Outcomes* sampled 2,500 students at four-year colleges and found that negative diversity experiences on campus had negative consequences for critical thinking and cognitive skill development. Conversely, positive diversity interactions and discussions supported the ability to challenge established viewpoints and more thoughtfully reflect upon complex issues.

An inclusive classroom has the potential to be a medium for such positive discussions and interactions, but creating this environment is multifaceted and requires thoughtful preparation. One effective and immediate strategy may be as simple as integrating more diverse stories and narratives into lectures and course materials.

“ Stories have the power to bring all voices into the conversation in ways that other approaches may not be able to do.

—Scott Abernathy,  
Associate Professor University of Minnesota

## Using Narratives and Storytelling as an Inclusion Strategy

Cognitive research and classroom evidence consistently support storytelling and the use of narrative as a valid teaching and learning strategy toward improving engagement, critical thinking and concept retention. Scott Abernathy, an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota takes storytelling one step further by including narratives that reflect his students' diverse experiences. *“Covering examples of the struggle of African Americans to achieve civil rights makes perfect sense,”* he says for example. *“But it doesn't make sense that it's the only place where we hear stories of other political actions taken by African Americans or others with similarly marginalized coverage.”* Weaving in more diverse examples is not only inclusive, it also helps students understand and explore issues from perspectives that may be different than their own. Abernathy explains, *“In this approach, diversity is not a list of boxes to check off. It fills a much deeper role. The richness of experiences adds to a more robust understanding of the topics and concepts.”*

## Encourage Discussion

Encouraging meaningful discussion is not always as simple as it sounds, especially in larger classes. In his

large sections, Dr. Abernathy will break students into small groups for in-class discussion, prompting them with a few warm-up questions about narratives in the assigned readings. The goal he says is to eliminate some of the anxiety students may have about speaking up in a large classroom setting and encourage all students to share their ideas with one another.

Using diverse stories and narratives not only sparks in-class discussion, it also encourages students who may typically hold back in class to speak out and participate. Or as Dr. Abernathy summarizes, *“stories have the power to bring all voices into the conversation in ways that other approaches may not be able to do.”*

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