



Learning Through Story

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Abstract

Stories are how we make sense of facts and create meaning. However, in an academic and professional setting, it can be hard to know how to tell stories effectively, or even to identify what a story is. This paper explores a particular type of storytelling: the use of specific, personal moments to facilitate learning and transformation and to accomplish the telling of stories. The focus is primarily on the narrative arc and a subset of literary techniques that connect personal experiences to values in a way that engages experiential sensemaking for the audience. These are considered from the perspective of both storyteller and story listener. I use personal examples, as well as some drawn from the stories, techniques, and themes shown in other *Advances in Peer-Led Learning* (APLL) articles, to demonstrate how a few key descriptive techniques, narrative arcs, character archetypes, and plot types can all be applied in straightforward ways to enhance engagement and learning and result in good, successful, storytelling.

Keywords: Storytelling, Narrative Arc, Learning, Peer Leaders, Transformation

Introduction

“We are made of stories, and nothing can change that.”

Ted Chiang, *The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling* (2019)

It was 1993, in San Jose, California, in a warm hospital room flooded with white, fluorescent light. Sweat caked my hospital gown to my skin. Waves of exhaustion washed through me as I lay in a vast ocean of timelessness. From nowhere, the quiet sound of rubber wheels rolling on tiles invaded the universe behind my eyes. Maybe it was far away, maybe right in my room, but it spun me back to a specific place and time. I opened my eyes to see a nurse holding out a tiny, wrinkly, red baby. A thick shock of black hair haloed her face. My baby.

As I took her in my arms, the universe shook. My entire being shattered into a million shards, blew out to the stars, and just as quickly, flew back in and reformed into the circle of my baby and me. From the outside, I guess we looked just the same as we had a moment before, but we were not the same. Like a Japanese *kintsugi* bowl, ceramic shards healed with golden seams, I was transformed into a new person. We were transformed into a new us.

Up until that moment, I had loved many people and tried to be a responsible, caring daughter, friend, and spouse. But essentially my life had been about me, a telling of my own story. From that moment on, my life was no longer my own. I was mother to the story. When I walked down the street, I shielded my child’s body, in case a speeding car or random bullet or falling tree might strike her. It would be years before I learned that only thinking about my daughter, despite being in one way completely selfless, was, in another way, completely selfish. I had to learn these lessons again and again in slower, harder ways over the years, as she emerged into school and society.

This story is both uniquely mine and universal. Maybe as you read it, you thought of your parent giving birth to you, or of yourself or your partner giving birth to your child. If my story was doing its job, you experienced it simultaneously in some way as both yourself and me, and perhaps as my daughter, or even as the nurse or someone else you thought of. If you felt repelled by the story because of some perception of me or the situation, you also went through an emotional journey. And now, in some small way, if you felt anything at all, you are a different person.

This is the power of story. Stories—your stories—can transform lives. As Peer Leaders, faculty advisors, researchers, and students, you learned how to be you through story. Read the stories told here in this APLL journal – and then think about using the strategies described here to tell your own story so others can benefit.

What do I mean by a story? A story is not a list of facts. A story has a beginning, middle, and end. It includes details that quicken our senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. It reveals emotions that drive reactions to events in the world. If told authentically, it makes the storyteller transparent in a way that a list of accomplishments or skills never can. If read with curiosity and an open mind, it transforms the reader. We learn many facts and skills in school, but story is how we make sense of it all. Facts hang together on the bones and muscles of story.

We learn by listening to others' stories. We learn by telling our own stories. We learn by telling new stories. In this paper, I'll share a story structure that you can use over and over in lectures, talks, papers, podcasts, and videos, as a vehicle for learning and facilitating learning. I'll share examples from my own life, and I'll draw from your stories told in past APLL articles to explore how you and your peers are already using these techniques and structures in creative and effective ways.

Learning by listening to others' stories

Read Marianne Marin's "Peer Leader Challenges," where she tells the story of facing a hostile class, egged on by one student who demeaned her (see Love & Becvar, 2021). She could have given us her lesson in a single sentence (I won't spoil it!) but instead we sit on her shoulder and experience with her the surprise and humiliation of an unexpected aggression. We hear the derision in her student's voice and see the smirks behind turned heads and hands over mouths. We relive that horrible moment with her, while likely reliving similar experiences of our own. When I read it, I was transported back to my 20s when I taught English in Osaka to three middle school girls who tried all kinds of tactics to avoid working on English—asking me to translate Guns and Roses lyrics, giggling and whispering to each other in teen slang I didn't understand, or simply ignoring me. I felt desperate to know what to do.

And so, when Marin then shares her solution (the link's in the References), I'm amazed by her creative thinking in the midst of embarrassment and humiliation, and I'm moved by her ability to transform her students' attitude and experience. By the time she shares her advice, I'm completely convinced. I've lived this moment with her, and I'll remember.

Listening to stories is not a passive activity. It's an interaction, and you can get better at it through practice. Practice means recognizing when something is a story, tuning in, focusing on what you can learn, looking inward to find where it matters, noticing where you resist, and exploring why. Marin was generous with her story, including sensory details and guiding us through a clear narrative. We feel confident in the hands of a storyteller like this. If you practice story listening, you'll notice that you start to hear stories even when the

storyteller isn't as accomplished as Marin. Sometimes people tell too many stories and it's hard to tell what's important. Some stories are scattered or out of order. Some stories are drained of their emotion and presented as a list or an argument. With practice, you can weave these together into powerful stories as you read or listen, which then connects you to the storyteller's lessons in ways that help you learn.

Now think of the way stories are told in academic papers and textbooks. This style grew from hundreds of years of tradition and is a respected way to share learnings and interpretations so that trained audiences can quickly comprehend them. By design, to present data as neutrally as possible, they generally eliminate or minimize the emotional experience of the writer and even the people being written about. As a practice in story-listening, try to hear the story in them. For example, take "Peer Leading Small Group Discussion During COVID-19" (Dreyfuss et al., 2021). Imagine: Why did these researchers undertake this study? What must they have gone through as the country shut down in 2020? What fear and anxiety must they have felt for their students and their PLTL program? Remember your own emotions from that moment in time, including your physical reactions. Holding that memory and those emotions, read each sentence with your eyes looking through theirs. Then see the people they are talking about. Don't make up back stories. Rather, gather concrete evidence from the writing.

First, who is the protagonist and what archetypal characters help or hinder them? Clearly, the Peer Leaders are our Heroes, and we desperately want them to succeed in their external goal of reducing D, failed, and withdraw (DFW) rates and their internal goal of gaining confidence. They experience the greatest transformation in the story. They are aided by the Sage and Guardian characters, the faculty members, who also narrate the story. (The Star Wars franchise was built on Hero-Sage-Guardian stories.) Students are alternatively the Innocent, the Jester, the Damsel in Distress, the Ally, and other archetypes. Note that character *archetypes* are isolated expressions of inner truth about human nature and relationships. They serve to propel the story forward by helping or hindering the hero. They are not *stereotypes*, where specific attributes and characteristics of one person are generalized to a group of people. Even when well-intended, stereotypes mostly reveal a lot about the storyteller while detracting from the story itself. Distinguishing between the two is an important story-listening skill.

Next, what is the sequence of action and reaction? Try mapping what you hear to the story spine used in fairy tales, improv, and Disney movies:

1. Once upon a time there was...
2. Every day, she/he/they/it...

3. Until one day...
4. Because of that, ...
5. Because of that, ...
6. Because of that, ...
7. Until finally, ...
8. And ever since then, ...

Our example makes it easy because it's written in this order. Here's my mapping of it:

Once upon a time: "The University of Texas Permian Basin (UTPB), founded in 1969, is located in Odessa, Texas, under which is one of the largest oil fields in the United States...Students had been performing poorly in General Chemistry since at least 2011." This is a classic story opening that describes the story world and sets the stage. We are grounded in a time and place. We have a concrete visual image in the massive oil field. Why did the writers use the oil field image and emphasize its size? Perhaps they feel dwarfed by it, which suggests a David and Goliath story. This already gives us a hint at who the narrators are and what matters to them, especially when connected to the discouraging data about student outcomes.

Every day, she/he/they/it: "In Spring 2019 a Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program was started." This is the Peer Leader protagonists' "everyday" activity. It's structurally the same as, "Every day, Red Riding Hood walked through the woods to take food and flowers to her bedridden grandmother." We can sense the protagonists' emotional motivation for helping people that matter to them. Given a sick grandmother, Red Riding Hood is someone who will care for her. Given the DFW situation at UTPB, the Peer Leaders are people who step up to make a difference. But we also know that things are about to get a lot worse.

Until one day: "In March 2020, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic forced a transition to online workshops...The semester was chaotic." This is the inciting incident and the defining moment for our protagonists. We now know where we are, when we are, who we're rooting for, and what they're up against. Our minds and hearts are engaged, and we settle in to see how our heroes react.

Because of that: "The Peer Leaders used their ingenuity and suggested activities for the remainder of the semester." Now we're off and running! From here on, both Peer Leaders and faculty members react in "because of that" ways to new environmental challenges and unexpected consequences of decisions made by themselves and others. The story weaves forward with professors bridging disciplines to rapidly convert course content and develop

strategies for online delivery, while Peer Leaders face a deluge of technical, behavioral, and emotional obstacles. Covid-19 was a crucible for change in this already stressed world. “Challenges were constant.”

Until finally: “Surprisingly, even during the Covid-19 pandemic and all its attendant issues, the DFW rates continued to decrease. In General Chemistry I, the DFW in spring 2019 was 9.2% and in spring 2020 was 2.1%, in comparison to the spring of 2018 when the DFW rate had been 29.8%, before PLTL workshops were introduced.” This is a triumphant denouement to our heroes’ journey. It’s the happy resolution of the external obstacle of high DFW rates.

And ever since then: “Peer Leaders became better problem-solvers...developed better study habits...became ‘reflective practitioners’...” Here is the transformation, as our heroes overcome their internal crisis of confidence.

We know that this story never ends. It must replay again and again in the struggle to realize effective learning for all students. But seeing this moment of triumph and transformation gives us hope and inspires us to keep going.

Becoming better story listeners is fulfilling in its own right. It also helps us tell our own stories better.

Learning by telling our own stories

One winter day in the early 2000s, I sat in my San Jose office looking out at a rare frosting of snow on top of Mount Hamilton. My manager, “Tetsuo,” sat opposite me reviewing the PowerPoint slides for my annual budget pitch, which I made every year in Japan to keep my team running for another year. I was proud of my slides. I had demonstrated our results from the previous year, pitched the value of the new projects, and used the formula of “tell them what you’ll tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them.”

Tetsuo looked up. “This is too heavy-handed,” he said. “You’ll lose the execs’ attention with this, and potentially lose their respect and the budget you’re hoping to get.” His words slammed into me, and my face reddened in shame. He had punched a hole in the one thing I felt proud of in the complicated semiconductor design world I worked in—my ability to tell a strong story. I had even translated it into Japanese!

“Try using the *kishotenketsu* pattern,” he said.

Huh? I thought. I’d been studying Japanese for twenty years and I’d never heard of this. That day, Tetsuo sat down with me for two hours and walked through this storytelling pattern that was completely different from the American / Western one I’d learned my whole life. The idea was to introduce a concept (*ki*), deepen the concept (*sho*), introduce a totally different concept, a kind of non sequitur (*ten*), and then resolve the two threads (*ketsu*). The

surprising turn (*ten*) was the key to capturing the attention of the execs in Japan. The budget pitch that year won not only the projects I asked for but also the opportunity to work with an entirely new group whose director had attended.

This pattern of storytelling would likely have been less effective with U.S. execs. I learned that day the critical importance not only of telling the right story for the right audience but also of telling it in the right way. The way you tell a story gives it meaning and makes your audience feel the way you want them to feel.

You don't need to be an award-winning novelist to tell a good leadership story. A simple formula will suffice. I used the same narrative arc in the two stories I just told about my daughter's birth and creating a budget pitch. It's a specific version of the "Once upon a time" story spine, and it's surprisingly effective for telling many types of personal stories in a professional context, at least in the U.S. and in English.

You may have found yourself less emotionally connected to the second story about the budget pitch than the first about giving birth. For one thing, the opening story almost always has the biggest impact. In addition, work-related stories are less universal and require more explanation, which can make them harder to tell and listen to with emotional power. If you're new to this, start with a single moment in your life that you have a strong emotion about. These are the "inflection points" that Jonathan Meyers describes in "Student to Coordinator: My 20-year PLTL Journey" (2022). Try first with a moment from your childhood, because those can provide your most powerful emotional material and are easiest to tell effectively. Think about, and *feel*, how this moment or event connects to a learning and value you want your audience to experience with you.

Here is the formula that I use. I learned and honed this while working with many mentors over the years, but most particularly with storyteller extraordinaire Arina Isaacson. Check out her website for inspiration (<https://www.arinainc.com>)!

You can use this, too:

1. Launch with a specific memory, focusing on the moment something important happened. Go deep rather than wide. This takes a lot of storytelling discipline. (Think how much more powerful movie openings generally are, grounded in a single moment, than the montages that so often get introduced somewhere in the middle to speed the story along.)

2. Immediately locate your audience in a place and time—a year or season, or your age at the time; a city or country, or a recognizable setting, such as a classroom or park. Without this, your audience will float in nowhere-land and stop listening while trying to figure out where and when they are.

3. In the opening moments, provide sensory details about the setting and how those affected you. This is where your listeners' mirror neurons start to fire, and they begin to see and feel through your eyes.

4. Introduce the challenge, obstacle, conflict (inner or outer), or conundrum that you faced. Do this after you've established the setting. You should have your audience's full engagement before you reveal the obstacle.

5. Move the story forward with a series of actions and reactions, using surprise revelations, sensory detail, changing emotions, humor, metaphor, dialog, alliteration, rhyme, or any literary techniques you can bring to bear effectively. One risk in the middle is disorienting listeners by jumping randomly in time, place, and event. This short formula works best when it stays zoomed in on your concrete experiences, only has one or two other characters, and goes in chronological order. Have your protagonist-self overcome one or two challenges and change or intensify emotions each time.

6. End with a revelation or denouement, depicting your ultimate learning. Here, finally, you can zoom out and time travel, sharing how the experience affected you in other parts of your life. Resolve the external conflict, so that the story plot isn't left hanging. Resolve the internal conflict, which is the learning about the value you are championing. Unlike in more artistic contexts, you should explicitly state this value. Sometimes you don't know what it is until you've worked through your story a few times. Other times, if you start with a value, you don't know exactly how it connects to the event, or even what the event is, exactly. Allow this to evolve with iterations. It's part of learning who you are through storytelling.

Think about how much of your story you're devoting to each of these sections. If, for example, you're telling a two-minute story to kick off a talk, use the first 30 seconds for the introductory setup. Fill the middle 60 seconds with the obstacle revelation and the ensuing actions and reactions. Save the last 30 seconds for the ending, connecting to broader implications.

Using this structure alone is powerful. As you practice, continually breathe life into the language you use. Get more specific and concrete, and then layer on sensory detail. Play with different versions. For instance, instead of saying, "I often faced an unfriendly classroom," choose a specific moment: "On my third day as a Peer Leader, I stood facing what seemed like a sea of hostile faces." You could push it even further by having the environment express the threat, too: "Day 3 as a Peer Leader. My acceptance email was still glowing through the phone in my jacket pocket, a comforting warmth that I really needed right now. I stood in front of my first classroom, 16 pairs of hostile eyes piercing every fragment of the self-confidence I had mustered to be here. Somewhere at the back of the room, a foot tapped on the linoleum floor, a rough rhythm that, in the surly silence, throbbed in my chest and churned a tangy, metallic fear in my throat." OK, that could be taking it too far into film noir territory, but still, try pushing it too far! Test it out with someone else, and if needed, you can always pull it back.

Another consideration is deciding what stories to tell. This is about the content rather than the form, and you're ultimately the only one who knows. I've observed that these stories need to evoke strong emotion in the teller in order to evoke emotion in the listeners. However, this isn't the way to share stories best kept for a close confidante or therapist, especially if you're still processing them that way. You could end up more hurt than healed. Another risk is over-sharing because you feel angry or resentful. All of those stories deserve to be told, and your pain deserves to be healed, but telling raw personal stories in a leadership setting can backfire. People may actually feel the opposite of what you intend. Instead, focus on how you want your audience to feel and act. Make your story about them rather than about you, even if ultimately you do tell a story about trauma you experienced.

Telling stories helps us to become better story-listeners. It also helps us learn how to jointly tell new stories.

Learning by telling new stories

A story is new every time you tell it. You are a new person, the time and place are new, and the audience is new or interprets it in new ways. What I mean here by a new story, though, is one that combines your stories with others'. In STEM especially, we learn and grow as individuals and society by continually telling new stories. Here, you begin to weave the story formula I just described into longer story chains.

In 2013, I was working on an aging-in-place tech initiative with my company's innovation team, a group of engineers, product leaders, and designers that the North American CEO had assembled to develop product ideas addressing new market opportunities. At the time, I had just returned to San Jose, California, from two years of working at the company headquarters in Osaka, Japan. When I joined the team to lead user experience research, I was the only woman and the only existing employee brought to the core team. I was also acclimated to the highly consensus-driven, quiet work environment in Osaka. My four teammates were mid-career "stars" hired from top Silicon Valley companies, as a means of transforming innovation processes.

Suddenly, I found myself dodging skateboards catapulting down the aisles and nerf balls shooting over my head, while people shouted questions and jokes across the room. Teammates chased me down in the parking lot at the end of the day, as I was rushing to pick up my daughter, and tried to convince me to be a tiebreaker and support their latest idea of, for instance, a medicine scheduling app for seniors or a remote-control IT service allowing adult children to easily give tech support to their elderly parents. Our team was under immense pressure to come up with a multimillion-dollar idea, and I felt like curling up in a ball under my cubicle desk, putting on an eye mask and ear plugs, and floating away into dark, peaceful silence.

We went into our initiative with the goal of “helping elders stay in their homes longer.” Most of the ideas were variations on a Star Trek tricorder, using tech to monitor and manage health events. As part of uncovering unmet needs, we interviewed over fifty people who were aging in place or caring for someone who was. It felt like a noble cause, but our user research wasn’t supporting our ideas. Adult children who were caregivers sometimes wanted this type of solution, but never the elders themselves. In living room after living room, we ran into contempt at the idea that tech would solve anything for them.

One day we were interviewing an older couple in their small home in the redwoods north of San Francisco. Wintry light shone through the lacy branches outside their window, glowing around a small sculpture on the sill, a Picasso-esque woman made from a patchwork of shapes and colors. Both of our participants, in their 80s, were still working as therapists, but the wife was dying of cancer. Her husband was her caregiver, and they described how they hid her condition from their adult children, to protect them and to be able to maintain their own independence.

Suddenly, one of my teammates asked, “But Kate (not her real name), wouldn’t you like a scheduling app to help you manage all of those medical appointments, so that you wouldn’t have to think about them?”

Kate had been looking out the window, and she turned to him, deep disgust flowing from her eyes and, I think, piercing even his unwavering exuberance. “What I want,” she said, “is to take a long walk in the forest, to breathe the oxygen of the redwoods, and to see the sky. What I want is to hear my grandson laugh.”

In the moment of stunned silence that followed, at least one of us (me) had the epiphany that eventually we all had. It was not about “helping” older adults. It was about facilitating their purpose and dignity in the world. One of the golden keys to that garden of purpose lay in the relationship with grandchildren.

In the end, we developed a shared reading tablet app for grandparents and young grandchildren—the two age groups at that time who even had tablet devices. We marketed it as an app for children and family connection, not for the elderly. When we tested it with grandparents who lived far from their young grandchildren and rarely saw them, many had tears in their eyes when their grandchildren sat still and talked to them. Due to a corporate strategy shift, the app wasn’t on the market long, but for a brief moment, we felt we had brought some joy and purpose into the world.

I also realized that my teammates’ rambunctiousness and behind-the-scenes machinations, as well as my own heightened anxiety, almost all arose from the tremendous pressure we were under to come up with a “great” idea fast. I know now that we were one of the most connected and creative teams I ever experienced. I concluded that this team was so creative (while also so problematic and quite frankly painful at times) because we had a clear

objective, and this diverse team was willing to engage in “creative conflict” around ideas and objectives.

OK, did you notice how that story contained mini versions of my formula, embedded in a macro story? This type of story, describing a professional experience and involving multiple characters, requires more context. It’s almost necessarily longer. It’s also less immediately universal than, say, a birth story, and the risk is higher that some audiences will be bored or even repelled. (Not everyone loves the Silicon Valley innovation process, to put it mildly.) As a result, the storyteller has to work harder to ignite resonant emotion in the listener. I shared it because it’s the type of story you may need to tell as Peer Leaders and as STEM professionals. So much of STEM involves creating and evolving new ways of thinking and seeing the world. But getting others to understand your own epiphanies, much less buy into them, can be very, very hard. These stories are about framing new ideas and inspiring creativity.

As before, I still immediately located the story in a place and time—Silicon Valley in 2013. Next, I set up the context with an explanation of the team, the type of work we did, our goals, and some of the pressure we were under to “come up with an idea” (our obstacle). I included concrete, sensory details, and I revealed my own emotions. However, it wasn’t until the middle that I introduced one very specific situation, the individual moment that represented the universal experience of epiphany. I flagged it as a key learning moment by slowing way down.

I will tell you frankly that although that moment with “Kate’s” scathing honesty is seared into my memory, in reality, it took months of synthesizing interview transcripts and workshopping with many stakeholders before we all truly aligned around our new framing of the problem and subsequent product concepts. I didn’t really know what I myself had learned until I was trying to explain it to others. With this story, I’m not trying to describe how to do all that work, though. I’m trying to convey the power of the epiphany, to facilitate the audience’s experience of seeing the problem in a new way. This is the juggling act between *fact* and *truth* that Ted Chiang (2019) explored in the short story I quoted from in my introduction.

Here, where you’re embedding mini stories into a macro one, it’s helpful to identify where your story should feel linear and where it should feel fractal. We speak of time, and stories experienced over time, as a linear “journey,” but that’s only part of the, ahem, story. Minutes, hours, months, and numeric years are cultural ways of counting time in a linear fashion. However, as creatures evolved from this planet and solar system, we experience days, seasons, life epochs, and birth and death as fractal cycles.

To tell one of these longer stories, we need the linear passage of time to create a sense of movement, accomplished with transition phrases—“In 2013, I was...”, “At the time, I...”,

“Suddenly...”, “Again and again...”, “Eventually...”. However, if the story spine is all we have, it’s not much more engaging than a numbered list in a how-to manual. The listener doesn’t know where to pay attention. And so, we also need to zoom in on specific moments and create pauses that convey a sense of timelessness, signaling to listeners that *here is the thing that matters*. This is primarily accomplished through strong sensory detail, combined with the physical and emotional experience of that for the protagonist or other characters. For that moment, you’re not on a journey. You’re in a tiny, timeless cycle, which makes up one of larger similar cycles, which makes up one of yet larger similar cycles. It’s more of a cauliflower head than a road.

Similarly, a fractal experience alone doesn’t make a story, at least not for most audiences. It can make a poem, though! Mikayla Rodriguez’s poem, “Fear Became Fascination” (2021) is a powerful example. Her title announces the emotional transformation, but there is almost no explicit reference to linear time. Rather, there’s a cyclical refrain, spinning round and round in her emotional duality of fear and fascination and evolving to a unified experience of hope.

If you’re writing prose, you generally have greater impact with combined linear and fractal storytelling. The art is to experiment with different integrations and cadences.

Early in her essay “Comfort Zones,” Paulina R. Torres (Love & Becvar, 2021) injects a breathtaking pause, metaphorically swooping back and forth over the entire journey she is about to describe: “The global pandemic seemed to have appeared out of nowhere like a sudden hurricane leaving us with practically no time to prepare for the storm. Had we seen it coming, perhaps in the weeks leading up to the beginning of the semester as we went through training, we might have been able to sail more smoothly into this new normal.” Here, a sense of vast timelessness comes from flying at such a high altitude over the story. And then she grounds us, putting the emotional brakes on and bringing us back to a linear structure with her next sentence, “However, this was not the case.”

Writing is a craft, and emulating examples (and then getting feedback from a Sage) is one of the best ways to learn it. If you want to tell this kind of story, feel free to copy my structure and replace the content with your own. See if you can construct the sentences, paragraphs, and story arc exactly as I have, at least for a couple of paragraphs. Or you can emulate someone else’s structure that inspires you. Obviously, you shouldn’t plagiarize, but syntax, rhetorical patterns, and transition phrases aren’t copyrighted. You can also freewheel it, but I’d strongly encourage you at least to start with a place and time, and to include one specific moment where you pause and reveal a transformation or learning.

As we improve at story-listening, storytelling, and combining our stories with others’, a next-level skill is to identify the kind of story that we’re telling.

Deciding what kind of story to tell

In *Made to Stick*, authors Chip Heath and Dan Heath present the three most common plot types in the U.S.: the Challenge plot, the Connection plot, and the Creativity plot (2008). These patterns alone will support many of your storytelling needs as Peer Leaders, academics, and STEM professionals.

Sometimes it's hard to tease out the difference between the plot types, especially as most stories contain elements of multiple plots and themes. However, it's a useful exercise to constrain your story to a single one to evoke specific feelings and reactions—individual courage and motivation with the Challenge plot, collaborative bridge-making with the Connection plot, or creative inspiration with the Creativity plot.

- The Challenge Plot: These are David and Goliath and hero journey stories, where the protagonist overcomes a seemingly impossible challenge. My second story about the budget pitch aligns with this, where to succeed for myself and those relying on me, I had to rapidly learn how to think in a way I had never been culturally trained to. Marianne Marin's story of managing difficult students also fits this type (Love & Becvar, 2021). This plot shows up frequently in the APLL journal, as Peer Leaders describe overcoming extraordinary levels of anxiety, fear, and shyness, as well as resistance from their students.

- The Connection Plot: These are Good Samaritan or Romeo and Juliet stories, where people bridge vast social gaps to help, love, and work with each other in ways unthought of before. Georgina S. Martinez's article on the impact of PLTL on her life as a Latina (2022) is a superlative example of this plot type. She crossed physical, emotional, language, and cultural barriers, and as a Peer Leader she was ultimately able to "build a bridge between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students." She explicitly connects these experiences to the values she wants to share: "Diversity and acceptance are key to making a cohesive, respectful, and safe community for everyone." Peer Leading Small Group Discussion During COVID-19 is in many ways a Connection story, too, describing how a learning specialist and chemistry specialist bridged

disciplines, how Peer Leaders gained empathy for professors, how students gained respect for Peer Leaders, and how many disparate groups helped each other through a challenging time (Dreyfuss et al., 2021). These types of stories were desperately needed as Peer Leaders faced remote and hybrid classes, students in quarantine, and the heightened responsibility of keeping in-person classes safe.

- The Creativity Plot: These are Newton apple-falling-on-the-head or Sherlock Holmes stories, where people solve a previously unsolvable puzzle or have an innovative breakthrough that allows the protagonists and the audience to frame a problem in a new way. The aging-in-place innovation story I told followed this plot type, with the epiphany about what problem we actually needed to address, while it also contained a secondary Connection plot about

bridging Silicon Valley and Osaka business cultures. In “Growing through Peer Leading,” Peer Leader Ariana Ramirez described her breakthrough by having her students play Jeopardy (Love & Becvar, 2021). This was a classroom innovation that connected students across high- and low-participants, creating a true team effort and leading to greater overall engagement among students and with her. It is also a Connection story, but its primary goal seems to be to inspire creativity in peer-leading methods.

Going on down the road: Learning by experimenting

If you get this one formula down, you’ll be able to use it for the rest of your life. Rather than straying too far from the form of your stories, especially at first, try expanding your content. Tell stories from work or school life, and also begin to tell stories about people other than yourself—ethically, of course. Eventually, you may want to experiment further, borrowing techniques from literature, art, or music, or from your own or other cultures. I would never discourage anyone from creative exploration, though you may risk losing your immediate audience if you get way out there. One of my business school professors tried presenting a strategy proposal in the form of a fully costumed and staged opera, and he lost that corporate client. It turned into a great classroom story, though! It’s definitely worth experimenting and risking a few failures as you travel on your story journey.

We break and heal, break and heal, over and over finding the golden seams to join our shattered shards into a new whole. Your story matters for that process in yourself and in others. Get busy telling it.

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