Are you a storyteller?

Chances are, if you are like me, your answer to that question is “no”. But if you think a little more and reflect on your personal and professional interactions, you may start to recognize the little stories you tell all the time.

When you come back from a field visit, do you talk about what happened with a colleague?

After the holidays, do you have some family stories—for better or worse—that you share around the coffee pot?

What do you respond when someone asks you “where are you from?” “where did you grow up?” “how did you learn how to do that?” “what’s your story?”.

When I first began researching, reading, thinking about storytelling in preparation for our upcoming PDP meeting, I was very intimidated. Listening to TED talks about storytelling by great storytellers didn’t help. Those are “high bar” performances—quite intimidating. But, the more I read, the more stories and storytelling became demystified.

In adult learning, we’ve talked a lot about tapping into prior experiences—what are prior experiences if not the stories we’re written in our brains as we’ve lived our life? We all have stories, we’ve all heard stories from others and read stories in books. The question for me began to be less about how to be a great storyteller, crafting tales that entertain in a performance, and more about how to be more deliberate about my own everyday storytelling and story listening. A TED-worthy talk? Who knows, maybe someday, but that’s far too daunting for me to consider now.

The question, or really quest, that I plan to grapple with—and hopefully you can too, is how to recognize and refine the stories I’m already telling and how to better notice the stories I encounter each day. I hope this quest will open my mind to finding and remembering new stories from my own experiences, the experiences of friends, family and people I work with, movies, books and articles, and use those stories more deliberately in the service of facilitating learning and motivating change.

This simple quest is daunting enough for me now, but something I think is feasible, and may even be fun. I hope you will agree after we dip our toes into the waters of storytelling at our upcoming meeting.

As you review the information about stories and storytelling in this digest, I hope the wheels will start turning in your brain about stories you have to tell, and the audiences waiting to hear them.
The influence business
We all work in the influence business. Influencing people to make changes is what most transactions and interactions of our world are about. It is the driving force behind the work done in most walks of life, including the walks of life represented in our SARE PDP group—educator of adults, researcher of new ideas, advisor and advocate for policy. We’re all trying to “sell” something and inspire people to make changes—whether that change means buying a product, supporting a cause, embracing a new idea, or adopting a new way of doing things.

The vacuum cleaner manufacturer aims to influence people to recognize their need for his vacuum (oh that pet hair!), to desire and aspire to own his vacuum (my vacuum is the greatest for getting pet hair!), and ultimately buy his vacuum (your life will be much better when you own my vacuum!).

As educators we don’t always think this way, but what is teaching if not influencing others to understand and accept new ideas, to embrace new attitudes and outlooks, and to do new things that can enhance their life situations.

The aim of our influence
As educators of adults within SARE, working to bring about changes in agriculture that make it more economically, environmentally and socially sustainable for those involved (usually farmers, but also sometimes communities and consumers), the ultimate aim of our influence is to get farmers to try new practices and strategies whose merits are supported by scientific, social and economic theories, research data, and sometimes the anecdotal success of other farmers.

As train-the-trainer educators, we have that challenging middle step of influencing other educators and farm advisors to take up the teaching/influence mantle to spread the message of change, ripple-like, to farmers.

Obstacles to influence
What gets in the way of people listening to you when you have something to sell?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obstacles</th>
<th>aka Their mental models</th>
<th>aka The old stories already in mind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old habits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prejudices and Beliefs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preconceived ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fears</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inattention</td>
<td>aka Lack of motivation</td>
<td>aka Inability to connect new information to old stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complacency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrelevance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Incorporating stories into presentations and other learning situations can:
- gain attention
- help overcome obstacles to listening
- improve motivation to learn and learning
- inspire behavior change.”

“We are the sum of the influence and impact we have, in our lives, on others.”
- Carl Sagan

“You can’t make people listen to you; you can entice, inspire, cajole, stimulate or fascinate, but not make.”
- Annette Simmons
Why Story?

Since long before written words existed, humans have used stories to understand and explain who we are, how we fit in a group, how we came to know, how we negotiate meaning and how we communicate (10). In addition to influencing actions, stories have long been used to teach, preserve traditions, transmit morals, give hope, encourage critical reflection, describe conditions before and after an event, and help people understand old and new situations (3). Because our brains are wired to think in stories, learning though stories feels effortless and is pleasurable.

It’s not just the facts that matter
We’ve come to an understanding through our study of how the adult brain learns, that simply presenting all the facts and data, convincing and “true” as these may be, is generally not enough to result in deep learning or to influence our learners to make recommended changes. We need only consider the topic of climate change to comprehend the inadequacy of concrete, indisputable facts and reputable data for enacting learning and change on their own. Influence [learning] is a function of grabbing someone’s attention, connecting to what they already know and feel is important, and linking that feeling to whatever you want them to understand, do or feel. (8).

Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There, she dressed Truth in story, warmed her and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the villagers’ doors and was readily welcomed into the people’s houses. They invited her to eat at their table and warm herself by their fire. (Jewish teaching story, as retold in Simmons, 2006)

People don’t like to hear to the truth, and they especially don’t like the naked truth—the cold, hard facts when these conflict with their mental models. Stories can make emotional connections and allow you to provide enough of the cold, hard facts in a way that may open a person’s mental model to change. With a story that connects emotionally and the listener can relate to, facts in conflict with current mental models may have a chance of being received rather than rejected.
Your brain on data

When you listen to a presentation full of facts and figures, primarily 2 parts of the brain are activated—these are parts mostly responsible for language processing. (9)

Your brain on stories

When you listen to a story, your whole brain reacts—the language processing parts and also other sensory receptors and emotion—the brain reacts as if it is living the experience. (9)

Brain activity patterns of storytellers and listeners overlap

When a person tells a story to another person, both their brains experience similar activity. Stories are effective devices for connecting with audiences.

Uri Hasson of Princeton and his colleagues used the brain responses of a person producing speech to predict the brain responses of the person listening to a recording of the speech. The analysis revealed that during successful communication the listener’s brain responses become similar to the speaker’s brain responses.

This implies that people understand each other by mirroring each other’s brain responses. (Image courtesy of Uri Hasson)

**Adult Learning and Stories**—stories and storytelling as useful tools for facilitating adult learning

Below are few things we know from our study of adult learning and their relationships with story and storytelling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADULT LEARNING CONCEPTS</th>
<th>RELATIONSHIPS WITH STORY AND STORYTELLING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>We learn by experience</strong> — comprehension and meaning depend on the brain making associations between new experiences and past experiences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories are accounts of experiences that can serve as surrogates for first hand experience; our brain responds to them and we can learn from them as if they were our actual experiences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human brains have innate abilities to project meaning from one story to another (think of parables)(9). We use analogic reasoning to find relationships between patterns in the new story and our old stored stories, and apply the patterns to new situations (1).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning creates physical changes in the brain</strong> — learning involves reshaping old neural patterns and laying down new ones.</td>
<td><strong>Stories, as multi-dimensional representations of events, trigger emotions, empathy, and robust multi-sensory neural connections in our brains</strong> — we feel what the character feels, and see, smell, hear as the character does. This helps us construct meaning, and promotes lasting, long term memory (1, 7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotions and learning are biologically linked</strong> — how we feel directly influences how we respond to new experiences, our ability to think and solve problems. We pay more attention to and remember more strongly, information we have a strong emotional reaction to.</td>
<td><strong>Storytelling and story listening are fun</strong>—they involve us in the action; making learning fun creates positive emotions and improves interest and motivation (7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sharing stories promotes a multiplicity of viewpoints and sense of group identity</strong> — this creates a safe, emotionally positive environment for learning and action (6).</td>
<td><strong>Learners draw on prior experiences as they visualize themselves in similar situations as story characters</strong> — this enhances relevance and credibility of the concepts, may promote transformation and change in the listener as they visualize and embrace changes made by a character they relate to, and may open up mental models (their old stored stories) to new, conflicting ideas (1, 2, 7, 8). <strong>Asking learners to be storytellers, e.g. about experiences related to content</strong> taps into prior experience, improves analytical and critical thinking skills — they must use analogies and draw comparisons among concepts. Both story listening and telling may uncover mental models, illuminate new points of view and transform the listener and teller (1, 7, 8).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adults bring their prior experiences and mental models (prior knowledge, assumptions and values about content and context) into any new experience</strong> — these provide the foundation to link new experience to and construct new learning, and may also present barriers to new learning.</td>
<td><strong>Adults need opportunities to experiment with new content and use it to solve authentic problems</strong> — this helps strengthen the neural networks required for lasting learning. <strong>Adults are motivated to learn things relevant to their lives</strong> — they assess how well the learning you are selling relates to problems they want to solve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story strategies that encourage experimentation, improve problem-solving abilities and help learners understand relevance of the learning to their lives include:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>-Case stories that demonstrate useful application of learning;</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>-Role playing and simulation</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>-Photo elucidation—what’s happening or might have happened here?</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>-Asking learners for their problem stories related to content;</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>-Authentic problem stories or critical incidents for learners to complete;</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>-Challenging learners to imagine the consequences (the rest of the story) of certain actions and conditions (1, 7).</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adults will judge you and the learning you’re selling</strong> — is your program right for them? Is the facilitator knowledgeable, engaging, unbiased, supportive, nonjudgmental?</td>
<td><strong>Your stories of “Who I am” and “Why I am here” matter to learners</strong> — building trust and confidence in you is an essential first step for facilitating learning [influencing] (8).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So, what are stories?
Stories are narrative accounts of an event or events, either true or fictional that provide an effective, some educators would say essential, means to facilitate learning, persuade and influence. “A story weaves detail, character and events into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.” (8)

Stories are typically reflective and value laden, although the values are embedded in the narrative rather than stated explicitly. Stories differ from factual narrative accountings of events by adding emotional content and sensory details in their telling; and whether all details are factual or not, stories contain an element of truth and reveal something about the human condition (4, 8).

Humans of all ages are attracted to and naturally love listening to stories.

Six Types of Stories Needed for Influencing

In her book The Story Factor, Annette Simmons presents six types of stories (sidebar) effective for influencing others. A single story may often blend elements of several story types. For example, a ‘who I am’ story may blend in elements of ‘why I am here’ and ‘vision’ stories. Per Annette, don’t get hung up on whether your story is of a single type or blending multiple types—these story types aren’t hard and fast boxes, rather they are ways to help you think about and organize different stories you may wish to tell at different times for specific purposes.

The next two pages describe the story types and list prompts you can use as starting points to help you think of stories. Jot down additional prompts that come to mind for these stories also.

Your story idea may start as simply a remembrance of an incident and how you felt about it, a comment that stuck with you and got you to think differently or reconsider a position, or an anecdote you heard about someone. You may embellish and add details to tell a full, descriptive story, or the story you share may be very brief—maybe only a sentence or two. That is okay. There is no specific formula you must follow. Often a brief anecdote, analogy, metaphor, or a meaningful comment remembered and shared in the middle of a presentation can be quite effective for helping you get your point across or tackle a concern you know the audience has.

For example, consider this story from Tom Morris, used often with farmers. About 15 years ago when I was presenting this same slide about P loss from corn fields testing high for P to a group of dairy farmers in Connecticut, I noticed in the audience a farmer with his hand up. I called on the farmer in the back of the room and he said “why don’t you just stop collecting this data?”, and he was dead serious. The other farmers shifted in their seats. I responded, “Well, I could do that...but I think farmers are better off knowing how their practices affect the environment and taking actions to correct the problem. Otherwise farmers are viewed by the public as part of the problem and not part of the solution.” And my experience is that this is even more true today than it was then. And today farmers can easily collect data themselves, which puts them in the driver’s seat.

This theme of the benefits for farmers of collecting data on their farms is one that Tom returns to throughout his presentation.
On the next two pages are descriptions of the 6 story types and prompts you can use as starter ideas for finding stories.

You may find stories from your own experiences or from those of people you know personally or have worked with; other story sources may include retelling stories you heard and remembered, classic or mythical stories, stories from history, current events or about renowned people.

"People don’t want more information. They are up to their eyeballs in information. They want faith—faith in you, your goals, your success, in the story you tell."
- Annette Simmons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6 TYPES OF STORIES</th>
<th>EXAMPLE PROMPTS FOR FINDING STORIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHO I AM—people you wish to influence always have the question “who are you?”</td>
<td><strong>Tell a story about:</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| People may or may not know you, and you may or may not have a reputation that precedes you. Audiences will be thinking: Can you be trusted? Are you knowledgeable? Are you authentic? Can they connect with you? You may have different Who I Am stories that you use with different audiences, e.g. with educators, farmers, researchers or other technical audiences. | ◦ Your roots — where you came from, influential experiences, places, persons, situations  
◦ Something/someone that led you to choose your career path  
◦ How you ended up in your current job/first job/some other past job  
◦ A mistake or failure and what you learned/how you changed/where it led  
◦ A risk you took that paid off (or didn’t) and what happened/what you learned as a result  
◦ An experience or person that inspired:  
  ◦ Your work ethic  
  ◦ Your commitment to or passion for an idea or goal (personal or professional)  
  ◦ You to do something new or do something old in a new way  
  ◦ You to look at a situation/condition/behavior differently |
| WHY I AM HERE—in addition to knowing what’s in it for them, people also want to know what’s in it for you. In Extension, we don’t typically have the question of whose financial gain is at stake, but audiences will need to understand your investment in the ideas you wish to influence them about and your motivations for being there. | **Tell about an experience that illustrates:** |
| | ◦ Your philosophy on teaching farmers; your approach to providing advice  
◦ Why you care about what you are teaching  
◦ An ideal you strive for in sustainable agriculture (as a whole or in any sub-domain, e.g. soil health, water |
| THE VISION—this story is about conveying the big picture purpose and meaning behind the struggle and change you are trying to influence people to undertake. What are the ultimate goals? What is the “why” behind your message? This may be where stories of farm viability after struggle, environmental consequences from lack of change and benefits from change, or family happiness and community satisfaction may be appropriate. | **Tell about an experience or situation that:** |
| | ◦ Inspires an understanding of the individual/group/societal purpose for the work ahead/proposed change  
◦ Demonstrates the consequences of inaction/benefits of action for an individual/a group or society/the environment |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6 TYPES OF STORIES</th>
<th>EXAMPLE PROMPTS FOR FINDING STORIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TEACHING</strong>—these stories help people make sense of new skills in meaningful ways.</td>
<td>Tell about an experience that illustrates:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a story that can illustrate how learning or not learning how to use a new financial software program, a new test or calibration technique, a new planning or production method resulted in a positive or negative outcome for the person involved?</td>
<td>◊ How you or someone else learned a skill or the value of a skill similar to what you are teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◊ A negative consequence for you or someone else of not knowing/using a skill or a positive consequence of knowing/using a skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◊ A new way of thinking about a problem or skill that demonstrates the value/usefulness of a skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VALUES-IN-ACTION</strong>—these are stories or examples that illustrate and convey values you hold in your personal and professional life.</td>
<td>Tell about an experience that demonstrates:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.g. “you reap what you sow”, “do unto others”, “honesty”, “be a person of your word”, “be a responsible steward” or “make learning fun”.</td>
<td>◊ The implications of following/not following a value for you/someone else/a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value stories you share may be context specific to reinforce values you wish your current audience to embrace.</td>
<td>◊ A twisting of the value of the consequences of taking a value or maxim too far—e.g. “do more with less”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE THINKING</strong>—this type of story is used to get the barriers out into the open, let the audience know you recognize their viewpoint, and invite discussion about concerns.</td>
<td>Tell about an experience when you or someone else:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We often know what the fears, concerns and barriers are to new ideas and change we are selling.</td>
<td>◊ Addressed objections first to help disarm them, diffuse hostility, open minds for a message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe it’s anger and distrust of regulations and regulators, reluctance to invest money or time, the attitude that this problem is not important or you are not a contributor to it, math phobia, or even a fear that this content will be boring.</td>
<td>◊ Addressed attitudes of distrust and skepticism aimed at discrediting the messenger or message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◊ Dispelled fears of anxieties and lightened the atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Tom’s example story on page 6 is an “I know what you’re thinking” story)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GOOD STORIES COMPEL PEOPLE TO CHANGE

THE WAY WE FEEL
Stories demand an emotional investment.

THE WAY WE THINK
Stories pique and hold interest.

THE WAY WE ACT
Stories bring energy to the message.

THE WAY WE BEHAVE
Stories cause us to take action.
Finding Stories

Annette Simmons posits that discovering new stories and telling them on a daily basis can build wisdom that cannot be gained from a book, a mentor or any other secondhand form of learning. Finding and telling stories promotes deep reflection.

Below are story finding tips from her book The Story Factor.

**Look for patterns**—the recurring themes that established who you are as a person

**Look for consequences**—recall the particularly good or bad results of past efforts and how they contributed to methods you now choose and the way you develop relationships. Read Aesop’s fables to activate memories of similar events in your life.

**Look for lessons**—remember a crisis of pain or turning point in career or life and articulate lessons learned; the biggest mistake you ever made; a time you were glad you listened to your parents; looking back and things you might have done differently

**Look for utility**—remember a story that changed you and weave your new story into that; stories you heard that seem to work, ask others for stories and permission to use.

**Look for vulnerability**—tell about your soft spot; the last time you cried or were so happy you wanted to dance; an embarrassing moment; touching family stories about those you love deeply

**Look for the future experience**—develop daydreams of “how it could be” into stories with real-life characters; your worries into a story with potential negative consequences—how they will play out, who is affected

**Look for story recollection**—find a story that stuck with you and mine it for meaning; your favorite movie or book—try to retell the story from your perspective so others see the meaning you see.

“Go on a daily scavenger hunt for stories. Any event that creates emotion or happens because of emotion can become a story.”

-Annette Simmons
Basic Story Ingredients

Stories have a Beginning, Middle and End.

They have a setting in time—past, present or future, and place—somewhere real or fictional

They have characters—a few typical character types include:

The hero: the protagonist, the seeker—should be relatable
The villain: struggles with the hero; could be an actual person or an internal nemesis or challenge
The helper: helps the hero in his/her quest
The prize: may be a real person or an object of quest, a desired state

They have plotlines and structure—two common plotline/structures are the Monomyth and the Mountain

The Monomyth is also called the Hero’s journey and it’s common in many folktales and myths. A hero is called to leave on a journey, overcomes a great trial or confronts and evil force, and returns home with a reward.

This kind of story is good for taking an audience on a journey, showing benefits of taking risks, and demonstrating how you learned some newfound wisdom or accomplished a challenging change.

The Mountain is similar to Monomyth in that it sets plot events along a timeline, but it doesn’t necessarily have a happy ending. The beginning sets the scene and introduces the inciting incident, dilemma or challenge; in the middle is a series of small challenges and rising action before a climax—a turning point or decision point; then the action falls to a resolution in the end.

This kind of story is good for showing how you can overcome a series of challenges, for slowly building tension, and for delivering a satisfying conclusion about a situation resolved.

Source: (Lindsay, 2015)

“All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town.”

- Leo Tolstoy

“Come then, and let us pass a leisure hour in storytelling, and our story shall be the education of our heroes.”

- Plato

There are several more characters, plotlines, structures and just a lot more in general that can be learned about stories, but these basics are intended to give you a framework to think about how to organize the experiences you might want to tell as stories into stories.
**Storytelling Tips**

An online literature search for storytelling techniques yields a bounty, and I encourage you to explore. But you don’t need to follow a recipe or rules if you know a story and want to tell it—natural story thinking and telling skills will guide you, but there are some tips that can help you shape and flesh out a story.

**General Storytelling Strategy (6)**

**Hook** - begin and gain attention with surprising statistic, provocative question, interesting contradiction, a personal or societal dilemma faced

**Connecting Framework** – connect to something they already understand – analogies, metaphors; point out connections to other disciplines

**Use Show don’t Tell** – let scene unfold, tell it as it happened—don’t describe it; use vignettes of personal examples or news stories. Use learners as subjects (e.g. educators, farmers), but keep them as honorable characters.

---

**More tips (3)**

Stories should connect with people, emotionally motivating them to see themselves in the change process and ultimate destination.

Stories should be clear so everyone can relate to them, but also contain nuances that allow for deep discussion about what the story means for each person and the group as a whole.

Accompanying oral stories with visuals (e.g. images) can help the story stick more fully in the listeners mind.

Good stories are simple so the message is passed on accurately, spreads quickly and stays alive over time.

Stories work best when few facts are presented so that people can more fully remember them.

Stories laced with humor appeal more fully to listeners.

Metaphors and analogies enhance the listener’s ability to understand, embrace, and act on the story’s message.

---

“**Stories can change the way people see themselves, their work, and their futures.”**

- Nancy Franz

---

“The purpose of a storyteller is not to tell you how to think, but to give you questions to think upon.”

- Brandon Sanderson

---

**Tips from The Moth**

**Stories have a change.** The main character (or you) has to change in some way from the beginning to end.

**Stories have stakes.** Why did this moment matter to the main character (or you).

**Know where the story is heading.** Steer clear of meandering endings.
WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY?

FAMILIARITY
The more familiar a story feels, the more powerful it is.

It’s easier to fill in the gaps if a story is familiar.

AGENCY
Stories are most persuasive when listeners work out the meaning for themselves.

Tell a simple story so people reach the conclusions you want them to.

TRUST IN THE TELLER
Our feelings about a storyteller influence our reaction to their story.

Don’t censor the drama of a real-life story. Taking out the bad bits damages trust.

SIMPlicity
Simple stories and strong stories. Take out everything that doesn’t serve the narrative.

It’s usually the simplest stories that entrance us most.

Drama
Stories need dramatic development and emotional dynamics.

Real life has ups and downs so people relate to stories with drama.

RELATABILITY
The more people identify with a story, the more likely they are to be persuaded.

People are drawn into stories they can relate to.

IMMERSSION
The more listeners put themselves into a story, the more likely they are to change their opinions.

Source: ABC Copywriting, 2015.
References Cited