

I D E A 4

THE ART OF THE STORY

Telling Your Story, Owning Your Narrative

Let's Begin with a Story

There are plenty of materials on the market devoted to the importance of using story in business, branding, organizational management, healing, education and personal transformation. But there are very few materials that actually explain how to construct an effective story. This presentation explores this topic in depth. So, without further delay, let me tell you a story. Afterwards we will discuss what made the story work, and then examine the three levels of story structure that permeate the narrative world: the story arc, the story core, and the mechanics of story motion.

Once upon a time there was a young man named William Tell. No, not that William Tell. A newer, more networked William Tell. He is the hero of my novel, *Then What?*, about finding a path with a heart in a world that is unnaturally overwhelmed by the unrelenting influx of iStuff. The novel begins with William assuming the helm of one of the world's largest financial sector computer networks at the mere, mid-adolescent age of sixteen. It was a time in his life when managing the information infrastructure of thirty-somethings just so they could afford their yacht payments felt like a huge distraction from the far more important goal of extricating himself from the existential angst posed by acne and advancing puberty. The fluke of events that propelled him to his position of preeminence are too detailed to describe here. However, it would be accurate to say that they consisted of the kinds of tawdry tabloid titillations that we'll never get used to but we just can't get enough of. Once the scandal dust had settled, and the tainted had fled, there stood William, the only one left in the IT department who had enough know-how to keep the vast network humming.

In this vignette from the book, it is five years later. We find William Tell on stage in the corporate auditorium during the

company's annual Family Picnic Day. It's the same gig every year. The spouses, children, aunts and uncles of the company employees come to the corporate campus to drink stale cola knock offs, eat hamburgers on mushy white buns and watch whatever dog and pony show the corporation has created to entertain its guests.

This year William Tell has fashioned quite a spectacle. He spent the last ten months crafting the company's brand new, mega media, interactive, immersively hyper-linked, socially mediated, artificially intelligent website, and the family members were going to be the first to see it. He had reserved the great unveiling just for them.

However, as he stood on stage behind an oak lectern pecking away on his keyboard, a big problem was unraveling behind him. Although he could see the new website just fine on his laptop, all he could see on the two-story auditorium display that filled the back of the stage was a huge buzzing nothing. In his profession it was known as "the blue screen of death."

As audience members waited for William's new creation to appear, they became more fidgety by the moment, raising the din in the dimly lit auditorium to intolerable decibels. After all, they weren't executive types who brought a sense of corporate decorum to these kinds of events. No, no. They were kids hopped up on soda pop laced with high fructose corn syrup, screeching as they played first-person shooter games on their smart phones. They were socialites who hadn't seen each other since the last cocktail party, who were anxious to check in on who got what in the latest divorce settlements, and whether their kids had outscored each other on the SATs. As they trash talked their way through William's public mortification, they wondered whether they should cash in their stock options now, before it was too late.

William frantically pressed control this and control that. He reset every software app and reconnected every cord.

Nothing worked. Despite his best efforts to remain calm, he was perspiring so profusely that the sweat was rolling down between his body and his clothes, collecting in his shoes, making them slosh whenever he moved. He looked out into the audience and saw a row of adolescent boys with their baseball caps turned sideways who were chanting, “Loser, loser.” He heard a woman in the front row say, “Well, Madge, let’s go get ourselves a drink. No wonder Harold didn’t get a bonus this year with bozos like this driving the bus.”

As he listened to the audience grow hecklier and hecklier, he knew he had to act. He walked up to the microphone, cleared his throat and was on the verge of admitting his failure when a little girl, perhaps twelve years old, sporting pig tails and wearing thick-rimmed coke-bottle glasses, ran up to the edge of the stage and whispered, “Pssst! Pssst! Mr. Tell! If you hit Escape F12 three times, you’ll reroute the video signal through the second com port and it’ll come up just fine. Just another Windows bug. Yeah, you probably downloaded the patch from last night to fix the other bugs from the patch before that. Well, snap! That patch had bugs in it too and the patch this morning fixes the patch from last night. So you can go get the patch or for now just hit Escape F12 three times. Works like a charm.”

William, just twenty-one years old, wondered, “How does somebody this young know all this stuff?”

But mostly he was focused on the indignity of the situation. Here he was, Chief Network Officer of one of the largest financial sector computer networks in the world, unable to load a webpage in front of an audience of parents and kids, and up walks a little girl who offers him tech support. There was absolutely no way he was going to take her advice. Self-respect simply wouldn’t allow it. He looked down at her from his perch behind the lectern and muttered, “I’m a little busy right now.”

“It’s that old triple-encrypted BIOS,” she sing-songed. “It’ll get you every time. Do you need the patch? You can download

it or just hit Escape F12 three times.”

“Yes,” he interrupted her. “I heard you.” He kept clacking away on his keyboard and checking his connections, burying himself deeply in the conviction that there was no way a little girl was going to tell him how to debug this moment in public.

“Hey, Mr. Tell, I might have the patch on my smart phone. Want me to zap it to you? ‘Got Blue Tooth?’”

William watched an entire row of people near the back of the auditorium get up and shuffle toward the exit. All he could make out in their cacophony of cackles was an elderly woman saying, “I feel sorry for the boy. I hope he can keep his job. I’ve got a grandson in third grade who might be able to help. Should I call him?”

Suddenly he noticed a Barbie doll peeking out from within the folds of the little girl’s cotton jumper. He swore it winked at him. It was the kind of off-kilter moment that made him wonder if he was really dreaming. He began to pray he was. The little girl noticed him staring and laughed. “I carry it around so people think I’m just another normal little girl. I turned her eyes into augmented reality cameras with 5-megabit connections. By the way, I hacked into your wireless system here. Piece of cake. I can show you how to plug that leak if you want. Anyway, back to your projector. Escape F12 three times. It’ll work, honest. Why won’t you just try it!?”

William looked down at the little girl, out at the crowd that was near mutiny, and back down at her. Somewhere in his subconscious he was wondering, why won’t I just try it? What’s my problem? With the sweat filling his shoes and the psychic tectonic plates grinding away in his soul, finally, in one fluid motion he hit Escape F12 three times and the web page triumphantly filled the auditorium screen! The audience erupted in applause. The adolescent boys with their hats turned sideways hooped and stomped their feet. The little girl hollered, “Atta boy, Mr. Tell! I knew you could do it!” William lifted

her on stage and thanked her profusely. Barbie broadcast the moment on YouTube, where it was sure to go viral. And from then on, whenever he needed help with his computer, William Tell asked the computer club at the local elementary school to give him a hand.

The end.

Inside vs. Outside Stories

I tell you this story with all of its lack of subtlety so that we can deconstruct it and I can make a few points about how stories work.

To do this, let's back up and suppose that the problem had been that the cord between the computer and the projector hadn't been properly connected. William Tell plugged it in, and everything worked just fine. Would we have a story? No, because we wouldn't have the rising and falling action and the tension-resolution that a good story needs. Having a problem with the cord might kick-start the story if the cord had been broken, and the president of the corporation was rushing from the airport following a turbulent overseas flight just to see William present the new website, and there was only one other cord in the city, and William managed to get it just in the nick of time as the president took his seat in the front row. But just reconnecting a cord is too ordinary, and stories aren't told about ordinary events. Even the movie *Ordinary People* was about events that were extraordinary to the people who lived them.

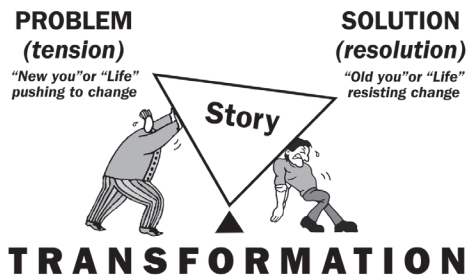
What if William had willingly accepted the girl's advice, pressed Escape F12 three times enthusiastically, and solved his problem? Would we have a story? No, because we would be missing the absolute crux of what makes a good story work: transformation.

Let's explore transformation in depth because it is key to what makes narrative work. The story is off to a good start. It has a compelling problem, which a story needs in order

to generate forward momentum. William desperately needs to solve the problem, and the pressure to do so is mounting. But the story doesn't really take off until the little girl walks up to the stage and challenges his authority. Of course, she doesn't look at it that way, but William certainly does. Most importantly, her actions give the story an "inside problem." This sets the stage for William's transformation.

Effective stories have both outside problems and inside problems. William's outside problem is to fix his computer. His inside problem is to overcome his resistance to accepting the girl's advice. Outside problems advance the events of the story, but not necessarily the depth or resonant quality of the story. Stories that truly engage us have inside problems that take us into matters of the heart and conscience, and involve us in the intricacies of interpersonal relationships. A hero's inside problems build a bridge between storytellers and listeners. As we listen, our sense of expectation is running full throttle as we wonder what the hero will do and feel next. In effective narrative, resolving inside issues enables story characters to overcome outside challenges. In this case, William's emotional transformation allowed him to resolve the technical issues with his computer.

Most importantly, the presence of an inside problem allowed us to gain access to William's psyche. This enabled us to root for him. We rode the moments of the story with him, waiting for him to transform because we wanted him to become a better version of himself. On a deeper layer, we imagined ourselves capable of the changes we wanted William to have the fortitude to embrace. We not only waited with him, we wait *as him*; his changes would become our changes. When he



pressed Escape F12 three times, we cheered. When the little girl told William “Atta boy!” we were right there with her, and were as proud of him as she was. By extension, we were also proud of ourselves. Immersion in the transformation of the protagonist provides the kind of engagement that any advertiser, novelist, promoter, TV programmer, YouTuber or campfire storyteller hopes we experience. Done well, it is an exhilarating adventure for the audience that resonates long after the story is over.

Three Levels of Story Structure:

The Story Arc, the Story Core, and Story Motion

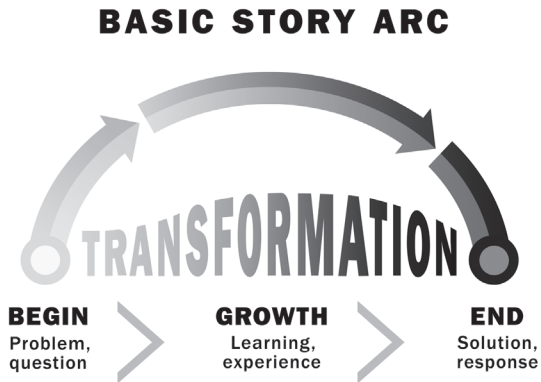
Implicit in my discussion above are the three levels of story structure: the story arc, the story core and story motion. The arc describes the broad sweep of the story; the core provides the overall dynamics within it, and story motion provides the details of narrative movement. Although all three are often developed in tandem, I am going to address each separately to help facilitate discussion about the role each plays in creating effective narrative. This mirrors the approach I typically use in storytelling workshops. I help storytellers focus on “drawing their story arc” first, before articulating the story core and the story details that materialize within it.

Story Level 1: The Story Arc

The arc is purposely broad so it can accommodate the dynamics and details of the story. At its most basic level, we should be able to describe a story arc in a sentence or two. Conventional Hollywood wisdom says that even a major motion picture should be able to be summarized in overarching terms, like: *Luke Skywalker resists becoming a Jedi Knight; eventually he realizes his responsibility to develop his gift so he can harness the power of The Force and save the galaxy.* A story arc is the elevator pitch we make to movie executives who need to know

that our story idea is complete, and adequately embraces a story core (discussed in the next section). A story arc is also the ad concept, curriculum goal or media project summary we will want to clearly establish before beginning a project.

It is most instructive to understand the arc simply as a hill. I want each of you to draw an imaginary hill in the air in front of you, like that. Careful not to hurt anyone, including yourself if you have rotator cuff issues. You look beautiful out there. It looks like each of you is driving a car with a huge steering wheel. That is the basic story arc, and it stretches from the very beginning of a story to its last moment. Now, let me quickly add that the narrative arc is never as symmetrical or smooth as a perfectly shaped hill. Story arcs are filled with



peaks and valleys, as well as subtlety and subplots. Arcs typically ascend more slowly in the beginning, descend more quickly at the end, and rise and fall several times during the course of the story. For more anatomically correct versions of the arc, I refer you to my book *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom*, which shows a number of story maps, diagrams and arcs that I have collected over the years. However, the hill is the overall story shape that defines a narrative event.

Let's head inside the "arc hill" a bit to consider some of its mechanics. The hero starts at the bottom of the hill where things are relatively flat and calm, and where life is in balance. We don't think of the main character as a hero yet because nothing has happened to cause us to view her that way. Then something transpires that jumpstarts the story, often referred

to in narrative parlance as “an inciting incident.” Perhaps there has been a car accident, a storm, a house foreclosure, a divorce, an abduction or a physical threat; perhaps someone has won the lottery, been reunited with long lost family members or fallen in love. Whatever the inciting incident happens to be, it shakes the protagonist from her status quo, throws life out of balance and forces her up the hill where she will battle her way toward resolution. The trek up the hill is goal driven. If she is physically threatened, the goal is survival. If she is emotionally threatened, then it is to remain psychologically and emotionally whole. If her children have been threatened, then it is to make them safe. The goal defines her motivation. Her motivation allows us to see cause and effect in her actions, which allows us to connect her inside and outside challenges.

As she journeys up the hill, she encounters a series of challenges. She also meets guides and mentors, as well as antagonists and naysayers, who help and thwart her forward movement. Her experiences cause her to develop skills, perceptions and inner resources that sculpt her character. In the process, she learns and grows, and ultimately slays her internal and external dragons because her journey has given her the wisdom and strength to do so. She makes it back down the other side of the hill where life regains its balance. However, she is a new person. She has been transformed by her experiences and will never be the same. She has become “version 2.0” of herself.

While most story hills have a similar shape and flow, they can draw upon an unlimited variety of story materials. A hill can be built on Luke Skywalker’s refusal to accept his Jedi powers, or William Tell’s inability to listen to a little girl who is trying to help him. Regardless of the nature of the hill, the act of scaling a story arc provides the outside challenges that frame the inside transformation—our hero may climb a mountain in order to mature and develop courage; or chase the bad guys in order to

work out unresolved issues about her own failings; or pursue a love interest to bring to life long dormant parts of herself. She journeys up the arc knowing that everything that goes up must come down. After the story is over she settles into the new person she has become. Until the next hill.

The Digital Storytelling Arc and the Magic of Healing. Our discussion of the arc provides an ideal segue for talking about one of my favorite storytelling adventures: conducting digital storytelling workshops with mental health clients. I have worked in the digital storytelling arena with thousands of clients, from 8 to 80 years old, from elementary school to PhD students, for the purposes of education, personal transformation, organizational management and commerce. But my favorite adventures have been working with mental health clients. They are deeply involved in slaying dragons and developing inner, transformative resources to overcome the often overwhelming challenges in their lives. Their hills are quite formidable. Their stories are always tragic and inspiring.

Before continuing, let me define digital storytelling simply as using your own laptop, touch pad, smart phone—whatever you have—to mix images, music, video and your recorded voice into a coherent narrative. Digital stories often have a documentary look and feel as we listen to narrators walk us through events that they illustrate using images and video. The stories I help clients create are very accessible on a practical level—they rarely require a budget, can adapt to whatever production values time allows, and focus on story, rather than the gear and glitz of media production. Fortunately, creating a digital story doesn't require much technical expertise. The last workshop our team conducted used iMovie on iPads. We trained a group of participants who were not very tech savvy in less than twenty minutes.

I was introduced to the possibility of using digital storytelling for mental health healing many years ago by the

director of a mental health clinic. She had seen my work helping students create media and speculated that therapists and media teachers could work together to help her mental health clients create digital stories that were empowering and therapeutic. From the outset, the results were remarkable and rather unexpected. Her clients, many of whom had suffered extreme abuse and had developed a number of negative behaviors as a result, disclosed deeply and eagerly about highly personal experiences. They did so in ways that were risky, revealing and healing, as well as helpful to the therapists who were trying to aid in their recovery. Nearly all clients were asked to post their work publicly on YouTube so that the rest of the world could benefit from their insight. Clients had been living inside their own stories and needed to create a new story for themselves that helped them shed their old selves and see life through a new lens. Creating a digital story was their chance to do so, and to build a pathway to their own transformation. As a result of making their stories, clients often reported feeling better, clearer, lighter and liberated. Each of them reported a desire to create more stories. To this day, conducting these workshops is the most gratifying work I do.

It is important to note that living within our stories is a reality we all share, regardless of our life experiences. Each one of us has crafted a narrative about who we are and who we aren't, as well as who we can and can't become. Often, our stories are based on the stories others tell about us. Their stories are often expressions of their hopes and limitations, not ours. The result is that our story arcs bind us in ways that we can't see. Recall my earlier discussion about McLuhan's figure-ground theory, "figure" being what we focus on and "ground" being the invisible environment that envelops us entirely and massages who we are in subtle, pervasive ways. Our story is our ground, as well as the story hill we assume we were destined to traverse. It is the emotional and psychological container in

which we unconsciously live. For this reason, our stories define our possibilities. The most effective way to change our story is to make it “figure” by telling it aloud, at least to ourselves but preferably to others. In the process of telling it we bring it to the surface where we can see it, understand it and change it. Think of rewriting your story arc as an exercise in creatively reprogramming your possibilities. We all live within our story arcs. That will never change. However, we can always change the nature of our story and who we choose to become.

Before turning to the details of fleshing out the arc at levels 2 and 3, I want to emphasize three aspects of the digital storytelling process that made it so effective with the mental health clients. Incidentally, these aspects also apply to any group with whom I have worked. However, they are especially powerful with this particular clientele.

First, we required clients to begin their projects by creating a story map (essentially, a very detailed story arc) that spanned a particular event or period of time, and which described their overall transformational journey in basic terms. We’ll look at the specifics of story mapping tools later on. However, suffice it to say for now that the story mapping process basically involves sketching “a hill” on a piece of paper, or talking through the specifics of the story arc with a counselor. This “arc map” then became the crucible within which levels 2 and 3 (the story core and story movement details) played out. Recall the *Star Wars* story arc described earlier, which captured an entire movie in a few sentences. A personal story arc works in the same way. With our clientele a story arc might be as simple as “Once upon a time, I was abused by a partner. But I sought help, which gave me the strength to leave the relationship. I emerged a new person, stronger than before and committed to never subjecting myself to abuse again.”

Second, clients were required to integrate two parts of themselves in order to become digital storytellers: their

reflective selves and their practical selves. Their reflective selves had to dig deep inside their experiences and revisit unbelievable pain in order to get close to it, understand it and give voice to it. That is, they had to confront difficult “inside problems” that, in many ways, had come to define them. Their practical selves had to rise above their pain and focus on a number of practical activities, like collecting images, making voice recordings and finding appropriate music. Solving these kinds of “outside problems” kept clients focused on completing their projects. The net result is that the emotional storyteller and the rational producer had to work together to create a final product. They kept each other on task.

Third, using digital storytelling workshops transformed the structure of therapy from one-on-one counseling to participation in a cooperative art studio. Implicit in this structure is the belief that clients are artists and storytellers with important narrative to create and share. In fact, sharing is key. Every workshop holds a group showing at the end. It is a moment of triumph for participants, many of whom have incorporated an expectation of failure into their assumptions about the future. Group showings are always compelling, engaging events, and often form the basis of relationships that evolve after the workshop.

Story Level 2: The Story Core- Problem, Transformation, Solution

The arc forms the story’s super-structure; the story core provides its backbone.

A story core consists of three basic components: problem-transformation-resolution. We saw the core drive the forward momentum of William’s story. He had a problem on two levels. His outside problem was that his computer didn’t work; his inside problem was that he couldn’t accept the advice of a little girl who was trying to help him. He transformed by overcoming whatever personal issues prevented him from

accepting her advice. These issues may have been sexism or ageism, perhaps compounded by practiced insecurity and unresolved childhood issues. Who knows? In a longer piece we may have explored these more deeply. However, the point is that his transformation is what allowed him to press Escape F12. Without his transformation, he would still be on stage stuck within his old persona, dealing with the aftermath of his failure.

Once you develop an eye for the story core you will see it everywhere—in ads, in books, in movies, in TV shows and in the more interesting stories that we tell each other. It is so pervasive because it resonates so effectively and universally.

Ads? Aren't they a bit short to contain all the detail I mentioned earlier about journeying up the hill? Perhaps. But fifteen seconds is plenty of time to portray an elevator pitch that embodies a clear story core. In fact, one way to look at ads is to see them as stories in highly concentrated form. There are a number of ads in which a customer is reluctant to try a product (the hero resists) but is convinced by a friend or salesperson (the guide) to develop a new understanding of the product's value (transformation) and change brands (to resolve his problem): someone's cleanser isn't working; on the advice of a friend he tries another, realizes it is better and changes brands. Problem-transformation-resolution. This is not a story you will tell your kids, but advertisers are hoping that using the highly resonant, universal story core will work its magic by commandeering our psyches on a deep level, making it more likely that we will remember the ad experience and buy their products. After all, awareness and attention precede acquisition; unconscious awareness is particularly powerful. Advertisers are betting that providing information in story form will be more effective than presenting it in list form, that is, than simply listing a product's attributes. People like stories. They don't much care for lists. Most importantly, people remember stories much more easily than they remember lists.

What does a story without a transformative core look like? As I explain to storytelling students, the opposite of a good story is a slide show of someone else's vacation. We've all been there. We're invited to a friend's for dinner and suddenly find ourselves immersed in a blow by blow retelling of his trip to Grandpa's cabin by the lake: Now we are in the canoe; there's the paddle we dropped in the water; oh no, look at the snake on the rock! And so on. The basic structure of the presentation is the list: this happened, then this happened, then that happened. Unless we were on the trip, we are simply listening to a series of irrelevant events that have no inherent story shape or transformative quality. We pray for the onset of a severe headache so we can excuse ourselves from the festivities.

Grade B action flicks also often lack transformative cores, using good versus evil as a central theme but providing little else to go along with it. Perhaps the hero transforms by becoming a bit more sensitive or falling in love in the process of killing the bad guys. However, transformation is a minor subplot, not a focus. The point is that stories without a transformative process don't provide a way for us to become emotionally involved with the characters and the narrative. We are left to ride the events. To the extent that riding the events entertains us (as the hero and antagonist slug it out, or a car chase keeps us riveted to our seats), then action films can work. But riding the events is all we get. There is very little that sticks with us after the story is over.

Resistance and Relatability. In the story told earlier, William resisted changing, a common trait among story heroes. A hero's resistance allows us to watch his growth unfold. It also gives rise to the tension that makes us lean forward in our chairs and fixate on his development, desperate to see how he will ultimately address the ego and angst that keep him from overcoming his challenges. We can relate to William's reluctance to change because we resist similar kinds of change ourselves due to pride, ignorance or any number of personal challenges.

It is William Tell's relatability that allows us to identify with him.

Let me emphasize two points about "relatability," given that it is key to a story's effectiveness. The first comes from media specialist, Kathy Craven: use the small story to tell the big story. The story I told is just one, brief incident in William Tell's life. Yet it is microcosmic, and tells a much bigger story that relates to his life and ours on a macro level. Telling the small story is a very practical approach to narrative. It limits the details and time period storytellers need to address, while allowing them to make big points. They can use a handful of specifics to paint a picture of universal meaning that everyone can relate to.

The second point is the following cardinal rule of storytelling: Audience members become deeply involved with narrative when the story they are listening to becomes their story. This level of relatability goes beyond simply being able to identify with a character. In visceral terms, we need to feel a character's pain. We need to enter his emotional ecosystem. Note that we do not need to have lived through the specifics of William's dilemma in order to identify with him. Our connection with him comes from the fact that we too have found ourselves under pressure in publicly embarrassing situations. It is the feeling that this situation generates, not the details that comprise it, that provides the connection between William's experiences and our own.

On a very practical level, the first step in establishing relatability is to take advantage of our natural tendency to 'willingly suspend our disbelief,' as the poet and literary theorist Coleridge described it. A cornerstone of the human condition is our natural desire to leave the mundane world behind in order to enter the realm of narrative fantasy. Effective suspension opens the door to "transportation," a psychological theory that claims that effective narratives transport us into story so deeply that we fuse with the characters, often experiencing a complete

loss of self. Wherever the characters go, we go with them; wherever the story takes us, we become part of the narrative caravan. The phenomenon of transportation accounts for the disorienting feeling of re-entry that we experience when a movie ends or we put our book down and are suddenly thrust back into real life.

Story Level 3: Story Movement- Motion Inside the Story

We arrive at level three, story movement, through which much of the detail of story plays out. Here we will consider how the ebb and flow of events within stories maintains our sense of narrative engagement. To demonstrate how this happens, let's do an exercise in building a story. More specifically, in rebuilding a story. I'm going to tell a bad story so that we can convert it into a story that works by using the principles of effective story motion. In the end what we create may not be a great story, but it will be an effective story.

When I do this activity with young audiences, I always begin by asking them three questions. The first is, "Who would like to hear a story?" Everyone raises their hands. No surprise here. Who doesn't want to hear a story? Compare this response with the one you would get if you offered to read a report or recite a list.

Then I ask, "When I tell you this story, do you promise to be honest with me about whether or not you like it?" Everyone pledges to be honest. I ask younger audiences to pinky-swear, and they do so willingly. Lastly, I ask them, "Okay, and what are the parts of a story? I just want to make sure I have it right." Invariably, every audience chants the same narrative litany: beginning, middle and end. I hear it over and over. I understand. That's how we have been trained. Hang on to this misleading oversimplification. It will become important a little later.

Okay, so here we go. This story is called *Uncle Albert and the Sandwich Party*.

Once upon a time there was a young boy named Thad whose mother sent him to the bakery to get two large loaves of bread because Uncle Albert was coming over for sandwiches, and Uncle Albert always had such a voracious appetite. Thad put the silver coin his mother gave him in his pants pocket and made his way to the bakery, led by the sweet smells of breads and cakes that beckoned him. When he arrived at the store, he greeted the storekeeper, paid for two large loaves of Buttermilk Brie bread and skipped home.

Later that day, Uncle Albert arrived with a voracious appetite, and the three of them feasted on cucumber sandwiches, hogs feet and pickle sandwiches, peanut butter and peach cobbler sandwiches, and all kinds of delectables captured between two slices of bread. They all had a splendid time, regaling each other with stories and fun. They reminisced about family holidays, and birthday parties filled with balloons and banana cream pies. When late afternoon arrived, Uncle Albert announced regretfully that he had to go home. He had to feed his six cats, water his plants and put a log on the fire so his house would be warm for the evening. Uncle Albert heartily thanked them both, hugged his sister, shook hands with his nephew and headed out the door. Thad and his mother cleaned up the dishes, swept the floor and then played Scrabble until dinner, which consisted of leftover sandwiches galore. The end.

Beginning, middle and end. They are all there.

As the students listen to the story I can see in their eyes that they are waiting for something to happen. When I declare “the end” they look at each other as if to say, “Is he serious?”

At this point I turn to them and say, “Okay! Did you like the story?” I can hear them sweat. On the one hand they don’t want to be impolite to a guest and, for younger audiences, to an adult. On the other hand, they had promised to be honest about whether or not they liked the story. The reality is they didn’t like it, which speaks highly of their narrative discernment

abilities. In plain speak, they know a bad story when they hear one. Eventually one brave student comes forward and says, “I thought that was really boring.” Then an avalanche of objections ensues that basically say, “that was sooooo boring!”

I ask them to help me deconstruct and reconstruct the story in order to revitalize it and turn it into a story that isn’t so boring. I begin by asking them, “What’s the story missing?” I wait to hear the magic word: problem. Exactly. The story had no problem.

The word “problem” is an umbrella term that includes obstacle, challenge, goal, question or anything that makes us lean forward and wonder what’s going to happen next. Because our story doesn’t have a problem it has devolved into a list of related bullet point events that hang together but take us nowhere.

The audience and I walk back through the story. We follow Thad down to the store. He grabs the loaves of bread, puts them on the counter, reaches into his pocket and...oh no, the coin’s gone! He’s lost his money! What’s he going to do now? Then we brainstorm solutions to that problem. With enough encouragement from me, the participants generate incredibly inventive ideas. They suggest our hero work at the bakery, panhandle, do some kind of street performance for tips, sell his shoes, ask the baker for mercy because aliens sucked him into their spacecraft and stole his money...you name it. The students could brainstorm forever if we had time.

I’m directing the activity, so I wait until I hear what I need. I always do: Someone suggests he should go back and look for the coin, and that becomes the idea that the students and I decide to use.

Then we retrace Thad’s steps and...*there’s the coin*. But darn! It’s beneath one of those metal grates that you see on city sidewalks that allow you to look a few feet below street level. Our hero thrusts his arm through the grate to try to grab the

coin. Ugh, he can't quite reach it! I ask students to pretend to try to grab something just out of reach, and to make straining noises as they do so. You try it. Reach down in front of you, and try to grab the coin. That's it. Oops. I heard someone hit his head on the seat in front of him. We're not going for that kind of realism here.

Thad's natural instinct is to try to lift the grate. He wraps his fingers around the cold, hard metal of the grate and tries to pull it up. Go ahead and try to do that where you are sitting. Feel that cold hard metal in your hands. Feel your muscles strain. Grunt as you lift. When telling stories, paint a picture with words and sounds that engage the senses. Appealing to audience members' senses helps them feel what the characters are feeling. It bonds storytellers with story listeners.

"Ugh!" he grunts as his strength gives out. Thad just can't quite lift the grate on his own. Now what's he going to do? Once again I ask the group to come up with ideas. Again, with my encouragement, I hear the most amazing ideas like Thad should get a helicopter with a winch, rent an elephant, get a robot with a giant magnet or see if he can pick up the coin using chewing gum stuck on the end of a stick. Eventually, we accept that he needs to get help to lift the grate.

I continue the narrative by telling participants that as our hero looks around him he sees only one person on the entire street: Mary. Uh oh. He doesn't get along with Mary. Last year he stole her lunch, she called him buffalo breath, and they haven't talked since. Actually, he just took her apple, but she loved apples. The experience left her not only hungry, but also deeply offended.

I introduce the situation with Mary so students have an opportunity to compare and contrast inside and outside problems. Until now our story has had only outside problems, like locating the lost money and figuring out how to pick up the grate. The story needed an inside problem to really pull us

into the narrative. Thad's interpersonal issue with Mary, and his need to solve a problem on an emotional level, provides that inside problem.

Again, I invite students to brainstorm. Again, I hear very interesting ideas. Thad could beg Mary for help. He could offer to do her homework, plagiarism issues aside. He could apologize and hope for the best. If that didn't work, he could threaten to spread falsehoods about her on Facebook. Kids can be mean.

Eventually the class and I settle on the idea that Mary and Thad need to resolve their differences and get back on track with their friendship. After extensive negotiations, during which Thad apologized for his thoughtlessness and Mary graciously offered to forgive and forget, Mary and he managed to lift the grate together. Thad invited Mary to come home with him for lunch, and off they went to share sandwiches with his mom and Uncle Albert, who always had such a voracious appetite. Thad made sure Mary got an apple. No, two apples. The second paid for the accrued interest on the one he took from her last year. At the end of the activity I hope I have not only helped students understand how a story flows, but also have provided a brief lesson on problem solving, interpersonal communication skills and applied ethics.

Let's look at the interior of our story. No doubt many of you have heard narrative described in terms of "rising and falling action." Stated simply, stories never sit still. They move up and down. Story motion appeals to our natural attraction to movement. We won't stare at a tennis ball sitting still on a table for long, but we will watch a tennis match for hours. Our attraction to motion is tied to survival, and comes from the need of our "ancient human" to continually scan the horizon for signs of danger. Our fixation on movement keeps us pinned to the moment so that we can find out what happens next, as it happens. Most story motion comes in the form of movement

and resistance to that movement, which provides the tension-resolution dynamic that stories need to be engaging.

Let's consider the movement in this story. Our poor hero. All Thad wanted to do was go to the store, get a few loaves of bread and go home. Yet, he was challenged every step of the way. He got to the store, but he'd lost the money! He found the money, but it had fallen through a grate and he couldn't reach it! There was someone who could help him, but she didn't like him! It's like life was out to get him! In stories, life often is. As he tried to move forward, life resisted his movement. As audience members, we rode the rising and falling action with him like we were surfing the waves of a roiling body of water. The medium of movement, more so than the message or the details of the plot, keeps us engaged. No motion, no involvement. However, motion combined with a great message and interesting details is one of the holy grails of narrative.

Once you understand rising and falling action, you will see it everywhere. I have worked with students as young as second grade who could very successfully "draw the mountains" of a cartoon. Roadrunner did this, Wile E. Coyote did that. You will see this dynamic whether you are watching cartoons, sitcoms, epic movies or documentaries; or whether you are reading novels, comic books or well-crafted investigative journalism. Some of my storytelling students have told me that thanks to my story training, the patterns of rising and falling action in movies have become so obvious that they dominate what they see. The result is that my students have difficulty "transporting into the narrative" and simply enjoying the show. I really didn't intend that to happen. Please, continue to enjoy movies.

Time for an activity break. Please draw rising and falling action in the air in front of you. Careful not to poke anyone. Use your finger and go like this: up and down, up and down, rising and falling action, like you are drawing mountains in the air. Now, in your mind, draw your day. You drove to work, but

traffic was heavy. Someone called you on your cell phone, but your phone was in your pocket. You managed to get it out of your pocket, but had to process some guilt about driving and talking on your phone at the same time. The caller turned out to be your daughter, who called to say hi but also to tell you that she had forgotten her credit card and couldn't buy lunch. You called the school's receptionist to okay a purchase with your card, but were very reluctant to leave a voice message on their automated system that identified your credit card number. Finally, you got to work, but there were no parking spots left. You had to drive around the block a few times, but finally found a place to park. It was actually closer to your office than your normal parking place, but it cost twice what you were used to paying. You move forward, life resists. You resolve an issue, but another appears. Life rises and falls. These are small events, and perhaps not story worthy. But this is the kind of motion that moves stories along and allows us to ride the narrative. Choosing just the right events for your story is part of the artistry of plot building. But regardless of the events you decide to include, they must have motion.

Another perspective of rising and falling action comes from story theorist, Robert McKee. He says that a story moves towards its goal, and then away from its goal as it advances the overall plot. I describe it as narrative zigzag. Characters head toward a particular destination. Zig. As they do, life blocks them in many forms, from a collapsed bridge to a collapsed self-concept. Zag. Movement-resistance. Characters zigzag their way over the arc.

In her TED talk *The Secret Structure of Great Talks*, storytelling expert, Nancy Duarte, deconstructs speeches delivered by Steve Jobs and Martin Luther King to reveal a similar kind of rising and falling pattern in their narrative. In her model, their speeches move up and plateau as they emphasize and expand on certain points. Then their speeches

move back down in order to make the next rising point more salient. Regardless of how you chart and describe story flow, the point is clear: Without movement and counter movement, narrative doesn't have the motion necessary to sustain our attention.

How about positive stories that basically move in just an up direction? They may be positive stories, but they are also flat, boring stories. Just to make this point very clear, let me provide an example of what happens when rising and falling action isn't present, even in an upbeat story. Suppose I created a documentary about a camping trip that went something like this. Day one. It was a great day. Everyone was getting along, everyone's socks were dry, there was trail mix for everybody and butterflies filled the sky. Day two. A great day again. The sun was out, there were even more butterflies and not a discouraging word could be heard from anyone. Day three. It was another great day...

At this point, you are reaching for the TV remote to change the channel because you are bored out of your mind. The issue here is that the story kept going towards its goal, towards its goal, towards its goal. All zig and no zag. Boredom causes us to disengage. So does mistrust. We inherently distrust a story like this for the same reasons that we inherently distrust promotional materials, or overly optimistic quarterly reports. They don't ring true as stories. We can't relate to them. They don't remind us of our story. They threaten to waste our time.

This story would have worked much better had it unfolded like this. Day one. The campers were having a great day, until the wind blew away their tent. Fortunately they found a cave nearby where they could sleep that night, but strange sounds coming from inside the cave made them fear that animals were already living there. They managed to get set up inside the cave, but realized they had lost all of their bottled water. There was a shallow creek inside the cave, but they didn't know whether

the water was safe to drink. A conversation ensued about the water, which quickly became a heated argument about *why were they on that stupid camping trip anyway when they barely knew each other and weren't even really friends!* The health of the camping trip was clearly in peril. The estranged, mistrustful campers had to figure out how to get along if they were going to solve practical problems of survival and have any hope of enjoying themselves. And they hadn't even reached day two yet. From a narrative perspective, this situation brings together a very effective combination of inside and outside problems. In addition, the campers' situation is much more realistic and believable, as anyone who has been camping will tell you. If their days had been filled with nothing but sunshine and butterflies, then they might have a story to share with their friends. But the rest of us wouldn't want to hear it.

The bottom line is that time is precious and we could always be doing something else. Maintaining attention is everyone's goal, whether you are a storyteller, a spouse, a marketer or a friend. Every company's nightmare is user disengagement. In the digital age, disengagement happens quickly and often unconsciously with the click of a button or a tap on the screen. How do we engage an audience to give us a chance? By using a well-developed story that moves up and down, through the hills and vales of a journey.

Summarizing:
A story is built on a broad arc that carries the narrative from one end of an experience to the other. The arc houses the dynamics of the story core (problem-transformation-resolution) that drives meaningful



action and character development, which in turn allows audience members to make deep connections with the story. Permeating both the arc and the core are rising and falling action that carry the flow of the plot. The story arc diagram shows how all three story levels work together to form an integrated narrative. It is an example of a story map, a tool we will discuss later, that facilitates planning stories quickly and effectively.

I should note that this presentation focuses primarily on a more traditional, hero-based expression of story. There are many other less mainstream approaches to narrative, including music videos, absurdist drama and virtual world stories in which the lines between storyteller and story listener blur. Discussing these would be a fascinating and important digression to undertake. Unfortunately, we simply don't have time. If you are interested in this area I recommend reading the chapter I devoted to this topic in my book *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom*.

It's time for some more physical activity. Because you are the advanced group, we're going to multitask. Draw the arc with one hand. Let's see the big steering wheel. At the same time, draw the zigzag of rising and falling action with the other hand beneath the arc. Let's see how you do. The arc with one arm, rising and falling action with the other. Okay, that didn't go well, but you get the idea.

Four Foundational Story Concepts

Before I launch into some of the tools that I use to help people create stories, I want to address four foundational concepts concerning story and story making that should help you with your own work.

Foundational Concept 1: Lists vs. Stories

We are awash in different forms of narrative, from epic

sagas to hyperlinked transmedia to bullet points. Instagram, CreateSpace and Twitter embed us in the fabric of a universal broadcast space. The oracle YouTube entertains us with memes like Gangnam Style (over two billion hits), instructs us with do-it-yourself car maintenance advice, and fills us with the wisdom of Ted Talks. Augmented reality, bio-enhancement and all the new media and technology that our imaginations will bring forth will continue to broaden our storytelling horizons in ways we can't imagine.

One approach we can use to frame our continually evolving media narrative is to assume that it will always change. This approach focuses on the evolution of the technology. We can use this approach to build hierarchies and taxonomies of innovation that can help us understand the past in order to better predict the future.

Another approach to understanding our ever-expanding narrative universe assumes little has changed or ever will change. This is the world of Dertouzos' ancient human. Instead of focusing on the technology we focus on the nature of the narrative that the technology conveys. There are several ways to frame this approach, one of which is particularly helpful to us here: considering the world of narrative as a continuum that stretches from lists to stories. Media may come and go, but this continuum has remained rather consistent over the years. The primary difference between lists and stories is that stories integrate information much more easily than lists. This is a critical difference because human beings recall information more easily when it is integrated rather than presented in discrete pieces.

A colleague of mine in the branding business demonstrates the power of integrated information to his clients using the following simple exercise. He splits a group of clients into two subgroups. He presents ten words to one group in list form, and the same the words to the other group in sentence form. When

he asks participants to recall the words, typically he finds that those who saw the list remember very few words, while those who saw the sentence can recite it in its entirety. The magic of the sentence is that it placed discrete, disconnected words in a connected context, which in turn made them more memorable. Without context, we experience chaos. Context also provides meaning, and without meaning, human beings are emotionally helpless. Stories succeed largely because part of the bedrock of the human condition is the fact that human beings will avoid chaos and seek meaning at all costs.

The following example very clearly demonstrates the utility of placing information within the context story on a larger scale. I was working with an organization that wasn't having much luck getting the public to engage with one of its PR campaigns. The organization was trying to educate the public about the fact that children who ate breakfast before coming to school did better academically than those who didn't. The children who showed up hungry were so poor that their families couldn't afford to feed them. The campaign was in support of a school breakfast program.

When I asked to see the campaign materials that the organization's PR team members had developed, they showed me colorful pie graphs and detailed statistics. I yawned. I told them that I knew I should care but I didn't. Not yet. I told them that their campaign was only going to work if they presented their details within the context of a story. Further, the best way to approach the story was to create a hero who had a problem, and who was transformed in ways that empowered him to solve his problem. Audience members would then engage with the story because they wanted to know how the hero was going to overcome the challenges he faced.

By the end of our afternoon together, the organization's campaign had changed radically. It had been recast as a story about Juan, who dreamed of becoming a doctor, but

would never be able to attend medical school because he was too hungry to focus on his school work. Problem: Juan was hungry and couldn't focus. Solution: feed him breakfast. Transformation: breakfast changes him physically, emotionally and intellectually, allowing him to think and function at full capacity so that he can grow up to become a doctor. Then, after presenting the story, the campaign can show the charts and statistics that reveal how many people like Juan there are in our school systems. The audience's transformation is to realize the unfairness of Juan's situation and hopefully recognize a call to action. The most powerful stories are those in which not only the characters transform, but we also transform along with them. This kind of impact is one of the primary goals of effective storytelling: The characters change and we do, too.

The approach the PR team used was simply an extension of the principles at work in the "words in a list vs. words in a sentence" branding exercise explained earlier. By conveying statistical information using story as a vehicle, the team gave important but otherwise dry and disconnected facts real context and meaning. My synthesis of much of the neuro research I have read over the years boils down to this: We are built to favor information in context because of the meaning it provides. In other words, we are designed to favor stories as our primary information container. I don't know whether the group I worked with that afternoon ever used the new campaign about Juan that we had designed. But had they, and had I seen an ad like the one we designed, I would have leaned forward, listened and supported their campaign.

Converting lists to stories as a narrative approach is applicable in any field. In terms of education, recall my earlier description of fourth graders using animation software to create a rolling ball. At first, they didn't succeed: the ball skidded instead of rolled. Then they applied a more complete understanding of math to their calculations, and the ball

rolled successfully. If they had used the “list form” approach to reporting their activities, then they simply would have shown the steps needed to make the ball roll successfully on the first try. However, the students introduced a problem into their piece, which required that they transform by learning more mathematics in order to get to their solution. As a result, we became much more engaged in their story than we might otherwise have been. The bottom line is that when students show not only what they learn but also how they learn, their work takes the form of narratives and stories, rather than lists and reports. This approach is not only a much more effective learning strategy, it is also much more interesting to us and to them. Most importantly, when students create narrative about their learning we more clearly see how they think, create, and learn. In turn, this allows us to be more effective in terms of how we become involved with their education.

Incidentally, the next time you want to engage an organization in strategic planning, think in terms of creating a movie that describes how you want the future to unfold. Imagine the movie begins today and concludes at the end of your planning cycle, probably one to three years from now. Imagine the hero of your movie is a student, client or member of the public you are trying to serve. You don’t have to actually create the movie. That’s a lot of work. But just thinking in terms of creating a story in movie form will help you focus on the arc you want your organization to traverse, the story core that needs to drive its transformation, and the rising and falling action you might need to anticipate. The fun part is thinking about who gets to play you when your movie goes Hollywood.

Foundational Concept 2: Stories Are Who We Are Psychologically, Emotionally, Culturally and Neurologically

Concept number two is that story has not only emotional and psychological appeal, but also an innate neurological

basis. Neuroscientists like Drs. Paul Zak, Michael Gazzaniga and others have conducted fascinating research that looks at the chemistry and neurobiology of the brain as they relate to storytelling. Let's consider just Gazzaniga's work for a moment.

Gazzaniga studied epilepsy patients who had undergone surgery to disconnect the two hemispheres of their brains, a procedure used to stop the firestorm of neural activity that gave rise to their epileptic seizures. One of his research questions was, in so many words, "What does each half of the brain control?"

He discovered that each half handles specific responsibilities and doesn't fully know what the other half is doing. He also discovered that the left half of the brain has a particular function, which is to serve as the interpreter or the storytelling brain. It interprets events by placing them in a narrative context that isn't necessarily supported by the facts. That is, we tell stories about our stories. We live life normally, moving forward in real time, and our interpreter brain follows behind us, knitting together a story to place our activities in a narrative context. We could simply use lists to describe what happens to us, but on some very deep level we have made the decision not to. We need our actions to be connected. Only a narrative approach can do that. Again, it does seem that our need for story is at our very core. But this time not only the psychologists are telling us this is so; the neuroscientists are as well.

While the science behind our need for narrative may amaze us, we really shouldn't be surprised by the revelation that humans have a predisposition toward story. It's easy to imagine humans evolving to favor strong storytellers over weak storytellers. Presumably they could convey information more effectively, form bonds more readily and assume leadership positions more easily. It is not difficult to imagine that storytelling was a skill that wielded power and influence back in the day, just as it does now. It seems that story is part of Dertouzos' "ancient human."

Because we now understand that we have reasons to favor story that are neurological and biological as well as emotional and psychological, it seems reasonable to project that our need for story will be as prevalent in the future as it has been in the past. I've been in the technology world for over thirty years and have found that innovation comes and goes, becoming useless and quaint very quickly. But one thing that will never change is the need for a good story, a fact that recent developments in transmedia storytelling and immersive reality make only too clear. As I said earlier, the only thing that I know for certain about the technologies that await us in the future is that we will find ways to tell stories with them. This reality of the human condition will transcend whatever future innovation we might imagine.

Foundational Concept 3: Words and Media Work Together

As a storytelling teacher, I focus on helping storytellers develop their stories as written narrative *first*. Adding media comes afterward. This is a time-honored approach to media development that has always worked for me. However, the importance of the interplay of narrative, images, sound and other media cannot be overstated. In the words of educator Beth Stansky, "...pictures use a visual language to tell the story and the words use a verbal language to paint pictures. Often one language enhances the other."

In fact, for many years I have had to sell digital storytelling to schools as an activity focused on written literacy, when in fact it also involved visual literacy as well as several other forms of media expression. The problem was that visual literacy didn't sell very well in our "3 Rs" testing culture. I once had a heated discussion with an administrator who was committed to the belief that art and visual representation were just not as important in today's work world as having a facility with words and numeracy. I asked him where he obtained his

information and he showed me a website that was replete with sound, images, video, design and navigation, as well as text and numbers. Gently, I tried to explain the contradiction in what he said and what he was showing me. It didn't go well.

The following anecdote provides a low-tech example of the importance and expressive possibilities of deliberately combining image and narrative. I was working with a client who was creating a short movie that began with her dog pouncing on her when she came home from work, a ritual that apparently happened every day. To depict this event, she showed a photograph of her dog sitting in the kitchen as we listened to her recorded voice explain how antsy her dog became after spending a long day cooped up alone. On the surface, this image seemed well aligned with her narrative. She was talking about her dog and we were looking at a picture of her dog. But I suggested that in order to bring her narrative to life she take another photograph that was shot from the perspective of her lying on the floor looking up at her dog as he jumped on her. With help from a friend, that evening she managed to snap a photo that perfectly captured her dog's enthusiasm. The photograph provided a much better articulation between image and narrative. And it was an action shot, which always engages viewers.

This is just one very specific example of combining narrative and image. But it is representative of a much larger world in which a number of media combine to form the language of the media collage. In our transmedia world, audio and visuals are just the beginning. Each form of "now media" will demand its own kind of literacy. Yet, we don't teach this or test for it. The reality is that either we learn how to read and write using these literacies, or risk being illiterate.

How we approach the use of story media depends on our goals, audience and message. A more "image centric" perspective says we should develop both words and images

simultaneously, rather than writing the story first and adding images later. If the goal is to teach visual and written literacy so that students develop a sense of how they inform each other, then this approach can be very effective. Sometimes we can use images that are so strong that they compel narrative, or images that are so powerful that they don't even need written or spoken narrative. But for most of us in most situations, the "story first" approach, as described by the arc and articulated by a script, is where we start. It provides the foundation for all that follows and provides the greatest promise of producing articulate, professional media.

Foundational Concept 4: Story First, Media Second

I have been teaching some form of digital story telling ever since the Apple IIe was available. If you know what an Apple IIe is then I am going to assume you are members of AARP. I hope you received a senior discount on your conference admission. If you don't know what an Apple IIe is, consult an old person or Google, the great oracle. As I mentioned earlier, the IIe was a fabulous machine and to me was the first personal computer to be both lovable and useful. But enough reminiscing.

During my early days of digital storytelling I noticed something very interesting: As the technology became more powerful, in many cases my students' stories became weaker. It seemed that as students became more enamored of the gadgets and the glitz, they became less focused on what they wanted to say. The situation brought to mind Einstein's quote, "Confusion of goals and perfection of means seems, in my opinion, to characterize our age." This kind of technical distraction was happening with students of all ages, from eight to sixty-eight. It became urgent that I find ways to bring the story into digital storytelling.

My first step was to invite expert oral storyteller, Brett Dillingham, to work with my students. He told stories, explained

performance standards and technique, and deconstructed how and why his stories worked as they did. Keep in mind that he was teaching my digital storytelling students how to tell traditional, oral stories. However, that didn't seem to matter. As a result of his training I saw an immediate improvement in the quality of my students' media-based stories. Convinced of the need to teach students storytelling principles as part of digital storytelling training, I translated what I learned from his training into the planning tools and methods that I address later on.

Although narrative structures are similar across media genres, story production details differ profoundly depending on the types of media that are involved and the extent to which they are used. The use of media is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, media editing programs act like assistive technology for the aesthetically challenged like me, who needs a tool like Photoshop in order to draw a recognizable stickman. On the other hand, what happens when you give a bad guitar player a bigger amplifier? If you don't have something to say then your media will just magnify that reality. I have seen beautifully produced pieces that have no story; the high production values they used actually made their narratives worse. I've also seen well written media stories created with very low production values that have moved me to tears. The bottom line here is this: The technology needs to support the story, not the other way around. Story first, media second.

The great American philosopher George Clooney summarized the importance of basing movies on solid stories during in an interview in which he was asked to respond to the question, "What makes a good movie?" In so many words what he said was this: "I really don't know. But here's what I can tell you. I can take a good story and a good script and turn it into a bad movie any day of the week. What I can never do is take a bad story and a bad script and turn it into a good movie, I don't

care how much money you give me.” These are wise words that translated into my world very well. The net result of my process of adapting traditional storytelling to digital storytelling was to create very simple planning tools that could help my storytellers stay focused on the story and not get lost in the glitz.

Typically, my students create some form of digital story that mixes voice-over narration with video and still images, producing media that resemble documentaries. This approach to production is fairly straightforward and folds fairly easily into the flow of a regular day, whether at work, home or school. I also do performance based, green screen storytelling, which involves storytellers recording their original storytelling performances in front of a green screen so they can show images behind them, much the way weather announcers use green screens to show the weather maps and other images that accompany their broadcasts. When working with students, a “green screen” is often just a wall that has been painted green using whatever paint was available from the local hardware store. There is no need to use anything fancier or more expensive than that.

In post-production storytellers slide original artwork behind their recorded performances using “chroma key replacement software,” more commonly known as “green screen software,” which is now a standard feature in most video editing programs. The final product is a video recording of storytellers performing original stories in front of their own artwork. Green screen storytelling involves a good deal of writing, re-writing, rehearsal, image development and other research, planning and production activities that we value in education and the work place. Green screen storytelling is labor intensive, but worth every minute of it. It is a compelling demonstration of the DAOW of literacy described in an earlier presentation.

A Word About Storyboards. I find that most audiences have some understanding of storyboards. Therefore I will be brief

in my description.

Typically, a storyboard is a media planning document that looks somewhat like a PowerPoint presentation. On each slide appears an image that represents the action, images are accompanied by notes about a number of aspects of production like camera angles, music and sound effects. Clicking through the presentation steps you through the story, so you can make sure you like how it proceeds before you begin all of the expensive production work.

If you work in professional media you are expected to create storyboards for a very good reason: Large scale productions require large scale plans. However, most of us are working on a much smaller scale and neither need storyboards nor have the time required to create them. I have talked with a number of educators who won't get involved in media production with students because they are convinced they need to create involved, time-intensive storyboards. They don't, as the next section will explain. Another issue with storyboards that I have discovered over the years is that very few can "read them" well enough to determine whether the events they describe work together as a story. Being able to do so requires a kind of artistry of its own. The result is that storyboards often tend to do nothing more than make boring stories flow logically. For these reasons, I suggest you move away from storyboards and toward some of the tools that I am about to introduce. I think you will find them faster, more efficient and more accessible to you, your students and your clients.

Story Planning and Production in Four Steps: Map, Script, Table and Production

There are those rare people who, like Mozart (or so the romanticized version of him goes), can produce exceptional

work without much planning. The reality is that most of us need to use a detailed planning process to create successful media projects of any scope and detail. “Plan your work and work your plan,” friend and mentor Daniel Malick told me long ago. When we plan our stories they tend to be more professional and articulate than if we had created them on the fly. And they tend to be better stories.

In this part of the presentation I am going to get very practical about the tools and methods I use to teach storytelling, as well as to use storytelling as a communication strategy with clients. Note that the tools that I’m going to feature can be used to plan any kind of story using any kind of media, from traditional oral stories to movies. In addition, they can be used in any setting, from business to education to mental health. It is important to note that these tools specifically offer a media planning layer, should you decide to translate your story into a media format. You can use this layer, or ignore it, as your needs dictate.

I use a four-step planning process: creating a story map, writing a script, making a story table, and producing a digital story. We will begin with story maps.

Step 1. The Story Map – Visualizing the Story Structure

The primary purpose of the map is to combine the three levels of story structure into a single visual guide. As the story arc diagram shows, the “arc” provides the overall meta-structure of the story. It provides a crucible for the three elements of the story core, as well as a means to frame the details of plot and the zigzag of story movement. Practically speaking, you can create a story map on a piece of paper (the value of this low-tech approach is explained just ahead) and either include the labels “problem, transformation and resolution” on your map, or at least keep them firmly in mind as you are developing your map. You can annotate the map with plot activity using

words, phrases and even small images—whatever works for you. The goal is to provide the overall flow of story events in your own terms without having to use full sentences or detailed descriptions. After all, one of the benefits of this planning approach is that it is much faster than using storyboards, and more easily fits into your busy schedule.

While using story maps is helpful for anyone, it is particularly helpful for younger students who often “hit the sentence and paragraph wall” rather quickly after being asked to write a story. I encourage students to use whatever form of shorthand makes sense to them to minimize any frustration they might encounter with the writing process. In curriculum-speak, the story map is an effective pre-write. A story map is also a great “back of the napkin” tool for anyone who wants to capture the essence of a story idea.

The “arc map” shown earlier is very popular. However, there are many other story maps, a number of which I describe in my book, *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom*. One very popular map is the “visual portrait of the story” (VPS) by Brett Dillingham, which uses the outline of a circus tent to map a story. Imagine giving the story arc “cat ears” and you get the idea. I have adapted the VPS for digital storytelling planning, as well as for general story development purposes. One of my storytelling students in Fielding’s Media Psychology PhD program, who works for a major branding company, has incorporated it into his practice in order to help clients clarify their mission and goals.

Sometimes students create original maps. For example, one student used the outline of his house. His map depicted him walking through his childhood home, which allowed him to explain the challenges he had experienced with his family, before making peace with the past and exiting through the back door. Brilliant. Another student used the outline of a human body (imagine a gingerbread figure) to map her story. Her narrative

began at the tip of one hand, then split and simultaneously moved through the head and the heart as the story unfolded. Her story map captured the conflict she experienced about a major life decision that involved her rational and emotional selves wanting to go in different directions. In the process she explained what she learned and how she resolved her conflict before both paths reunited and exited the other hand. Also brilliant.

A story map is basically what you need in order to pitch an idea to an executive producer, because you need a hundred million dollars to hire Bruce Willis to play the lead in your movie. Or to pitch an idea to your boss or a group of colleagues in order to gather support for a project. The story map allows project managers and narrative developers to convey their ideas in terms of their essential components very easily, and to ensure that team members are all on the same story page. Teachers who use story maps tell me that they can look at their students' maps and tell very quickly whether or not they have the potential of becoming solid stories. The clarity of the story map allows them to debrief with students and offer feedback that is simple and helpful.

Part of the process I use with students and clients involves peer pitching, a process I adapted from Nikos Theodosakis' book, *The Director in the Classroom*. I ask writers to work in groups of three or four to pitch their stories to each other based on their story maps. They critique each other's stories based on this question: Are the problem, transformation, resolution and events both clear and interesting? Some of my favorite moments as a teacher have been eavesdropping on those conversations and hearing comments like, "Hey, Bobby, how about you have the giraffe instead of the elephant fly the helicopter?" This is exactly what I want to see and hear: students working collaboratively, using their maps to improve each other's stories.

Earlier I mentioned that I don't recommend clients use

computers to create story maps. I find that the story can get lost once the brain starts jumping between free flowing ideas and the details of manipulating software. Instead, I ask students to create maps using no more than pencil and paper. This planning approach “front-end loads” the digital storytelling experience with a story focus before production begins. Incidentally, my online students send me pictures of their hand drawn maps via their smart phones. That approach works just fine.

Step 2. The Story Script- Writing the Narrative You Will Speak

The next step in the planning process is creating and writing the script for your story based on the ideas you have captured with your story map. Because digital storytelling typically uses voice-over narration rather than video-recorded actors, a digital storytelling script takes the form of a word processing document that you will read and audio record, rather than a typical movie script that identifies actors and their lines. About three minutes are required for most people to read a one-page script that is written using double spacing and a 16 point font size, and which is well spoken, paced and nuanced. In my opinion, this length suits most digital stories and media forms. I prefer the sculpting model to the painting model, which requires storytellers to chip away excess material in order to reduce stories to their essence.

There are many practical reasons to think about the amount of time required to listen to a story, particularly the decreasing attention span of, as far as I can tell, just about everybody in the world. In a Twitter universe populated by headlines, substance needs to be delivered quickly. The exception to this is movies; if they are any less than 90 minutes long we feel cheated. However, stories in most other forms need to be brief. If you are a teacher, story length becomes particularly important because you’re going to need enough time to evaluate each student’s work. That is why I suggest that students create stories that

are no more than 3 minutes in recorded length. This length restriction changes, of course, if students are in a media class creating formal media for major projects.

Step 3. The Story Table- Aligning Story with Media

After writing your script, the next step in the four-part story development process is creating the story table, my replacement for the storyboard. Actually, the story map and story table combine to create a simpler, but more comprehensive and useful replacement for the storyboard.

To visualize a story table, imagine a simple word processing table that consists of two columns. In the left-hand column is your script. In the right-hand column are production notes.

“The game” is to create a new row in the table whenever the image on the screen changes, to which you can add notes about whatever images, music, or sounds will accompany your narrative. In addition, you can add images in the row, so you can see your images and narrative side-by-side. When you have finished your story table you have produced a script, a media list, and production notes all in one simple word

processing document. This is an incredibly efficient approach to story planning, and much faster than building storyboards. It is important to note that what I am presenting here are guidelines, not rules, and you should adapt them to your particular

Written Text for voice-over	Images, Media
Once there was a student who wanted to tell a digital story, but didn't know what to talk about. She thought - what would be interesting to her?... to her audience?	<i>image of myself gazing off & wondering</i>
At dinner she asked her parents for some help. They told her about her grandparents and a few embarrassing stories about when she was a baby... but still nothing was quite what she was looking for...	<i>image of family seated at table... myself, with embarrassed look on face</i>
Then she had an idea to visit a psychic...	<i>psychic & myself huddled around crystal ball... spooky music in background</i>

situation and your particular process. For example, if you are pressed for time, then skip the Word Table and simply print out your script and add production notes in the margins. Adjust as you need to.

An important concept to keep in mind when developing a story table is “media alignment.” The goal and challenge when creating any media-based story is to lead with the story, and use the media to support and align with the narrative. In the best media pieces, narrative and media work seamlessly to support each other. Yet, all too often I see media projects in which production overwhelms the story. This is particularly unfortunate for those who are using media to give voice to a personal perspective. Therefore, my focus is in helping storytellers articulate their story first, and then aligning media to support it.

Step 4. Story Production- From Plans to Product

With your story table completed, production begins. Notice that until this point the production process has not required story developers to use the computer for anything other than word processing and perhaps some web searching. Most importantly, up to this point, we have not needed to use any media development software. As I said earlier, once media production begins the story can take a back seat. Using a story planning process that limits reliance on media production software until production actually begins helps to prevent this from happening.

With a few notable exceptions, like working in the mental health field, I usually don't provide hardware and software. Workshop participants bring whatever media editing software they already use on whatever machines they already use so they can keep working on their projects after the workshop ends. Besides, there are so many ways to create media these days that trying to standardize on a particular platform seems pointless. Rarely, I will need to jumpstart someone's media

editing skills by introducing them to one of the many free media software packages that are available through the Web. However, the challenge of software familiarity has abated over the years. I find that most attendees come to workshops with enough knowledge of a media app to be able to go to work. To help participants take advantage of each other's talents, I begin workshops by polling them about their skills and then posting a "talent list" that shows who is good at Photoshop, iMovie and so on.

Recording Your Script. Typically, production begins with recording your script; images, sound and video are added afterwards. I have seen participants try to reverse the process by placing images in a media editor first and then narrating around them. But this approach rarely works. Speak your narrative first.

Because the narrative forms the foundation of your media piece, it needs to be narrated well. Unfortunately, this is not a natural tendency on the part of many first-time narrators. I've heard many storytellers read their scripts as though they were in fifth grade droning their way through an essay titled, "A Good Time I Had with My Parents this Summer." It doesn't matter whether you are reading a script for a digital story, or you're standing on stage presenting to an audience, or you're in a boardroom trying to make a point; your voice needs to be paced. It needs to be nuanced. It needs to be inflected. These qualities bring motion to your speech, which keeps us engaged. Our voice is the most powerful tool in our multi-media toolbox. We should help students develop their voices so they can tell their stories with clarity and humanity, and so they can develop the oral presentation skills they will need in their personal and professional lives.

Production Values. This term refers to the overall technical quality of media production. It covers a vast area that I simply don't have time to properly address. However, here are a few

comments that should help you frame your further exploration of this important aspect of media expression.

Earlier I mentioned media grammar, a topic I explore in depth in my digital storytelling book. It is the term I use to refer to many of the production value considerations that we encounter as media teachers and producers. I have seen a number of grammatical transgressions over the years, a few of which are worth mentioning as a kind of “fair warning.” At the top of the “please don’t do” list is playing music that contains lyrics while the audience is trying to listen to spoken narrative. The result is cacophony. Why aren’t the storytellers confused when they listen to drafts of their own work? Because they already know the story and have no problem distinguishing between the two voices. In contrast, audience members are hearing the story for the first time and literally have to “ear squint” to pierce through the confusion. If you must use music with singing then stop narrating while you do so.

Also at the top of the banned list is the inappropriate use of music, like playing something upbeat while talking about a serious subject, or simply using music that does not align well with the narrative. Mediaists should ask themselves, “What music would best support the story?” and then find music that meets that objective. This is not difficult to do in our era of plentiful, copyright free music. However, what they usually do is work backwards from what they have on their phones to what they use in their stories. Basically, their feeling seems to be that the music they carry with them is too handy not to use. This approach often results in the mixing of music and narrative that don’t align very well, producing a “reverse engineered” look and feel. In a sentence, the goal in professional media is to use music that sets a narrative tone and mood that supports the story.

Another item near the top of the banned list is the gratuitous use of effects, filters and transitions, like fisheyes and

barn doors that slap us in the face and completely take us out of the narrative when we see them. When I ask students why they use effects like these, they often say, “I don’t know, but aren’t they cool?”

If students have issues with media grammar then I give them TV watching assignments, much to the dismay of language arts teachers. Note that “TV” refers to any form of professionally produced media, and can be watched on any of the screens that populate our lives. The goal of my media watching assignments is for students to observe how professional mediaists address issues like using music, transitions and other elements of media production. As a result of their critical viewing exercise, students inevitably see what I hoped they would see: singing and speaking rarely occur at the same time, transitions are so subtle as to be unnoticeable, and effects are appropriate to the action. That is, nothing they saw or heard jolted them out of the narrative. My goal is for students to create media that is as professional as time, equipment and budget allow. I want them to create professional media for the same reason I want them to write articulate essays and conduct well-researched science projects; because this is what professionals do.

The Media Maturity Line. From an emotional development perspective, my job is to help students of all ages cross the media maturity line. That is, they need to approach the media they create not only as something they want to say but also as something others will need to understand. They need to make sure that their approach to content and their use of technique helps rather than detracts from that goal. In terms of content, telling a story that does not connect outside one’s experience fails in this regard. In terms of production values, recall my earlier comments about the clash of music and spoken narrative, and the inappropriate use of music and transitions. Media makers need to be able to ask themselves, “Would someone who is not living inside my head understand this?”

The consideration of the audience perspective in the planning and production process can be quite a leap in maturity for some to make.

Evaluating Media. What follows are four pieces of advice about assessing media projects that I have found very helpful over the years. First, don't give an A for anything that moves on the screen. I can't tell you how often I watch the following scenario unfold: Teachers, awestruck by a student's video, get that oh-my-god look in their eyes, automatically give the student an A, and slowly back away from the computer. Teachers do this partly out of fear, partly out of respect. Their response is very well intentioned. They think to themselves, "I don't know how to do that technically; therefore, I need to give them an A." Rubbish.

Teachers need to approach students' use of gratuitous technique as teachable moments in media literacy, as well as media production. Teachers don't need to be the most capable computer geeks in the room any more than coaches need to be able to outplay their best players. They simply need to be discriminating, articulate consumers of media, and have the fortitude to tell their students, "That doesn't work. The music is too loud and I can't hear what you're saying." Or, "You're talking about a dog but I'm looking at a picture of a cat." Initially, students rarely appreciate my candor when I am honest with them about their work. They are used to adults who praise their efforts without really saying why, or engaging with them about the quality of their stories or production in a meaningful way. However, along with honest critiques I also provide helpful suggestions about how to create more articulate media. By the end of their projects, typically students are very appreciative of my perspective. But while they're in the midst of production, they sometimes they have their doubts. I have learned to be patient with their process.

Incidentally, I watch similar scenarios unfold in the

business world, where I have seen far too many presentations that were big on razzamatazz and short on story. This is an utterly misguided approach that ignores thousands of years of evidence about the importance of story to the human psyche. Spectacle may grab our attention, but it can't sustain it.

A word of caution. While demanding professionalism from our students and those in our charge, we also need to be prepared to be challenged by new forms of expression that will continually emerge in the "now media" era. There are many ways to tell and interact with stories these days. Our technologies and story platforms will continually evolve and expand our notion of narrative involvement and expression. However, if our goal is to tell a clear story, rather than to develop an abstract poem or concept piece, then everything I have said in this presentation about how to create articulate media still applies. It applies whether story developers are creating a game, a digital story, a transmersive environment, or some new form of narrative we can't imagine yet. I predict that I could come back in one thousand years and find that we would still honor a good story much the way we do now. In order to prove this though, I need some of your students or employees to invent a time machine.

My second piece of advice for evaluating media comes in the form of an observation. I find that it's impossible for me to effectively evaluate both the story and the production values of a media piece at the same time. Therefore, I have to evaluate each media project twice. First, I watch for the story. As I do, I make notes about the articulation of the story core as the narrative traverses the arc and rides the "what's going to happen next" zigzag. Then I watch the same media piece a second time immediately thereafter to assess production values. Because I already know the story, and am not waiting to see what will happen next, I can step back from the story and focus on how well it was constructed. I can pay close attention to issues of media grammar, like the use of music, solid narrative,

transitions, etc. The bottom line is that you may need to leave more time for the evaluation process than you might think.

My third piece of advice is to analyze and evaluate everything students produce in the process of creating media, not just the final project that we see on the screen. This includes evaluating their research and writing, as well as their images and speaking—that is, all aspects of the DAOW of literacy. If handled professionally, a single media project provides an opportunity for students to develop a very rich, multi-layered portfolio that spans traditional and new media literacies.

My fourth piece of advice has to do with “finding stories by asking questions.” Sometimes workshop participants tell me, “I don’t have a story” and become what I call “story stuck.” Sometimes I will ask them to create a story about not having a story. These stories have been some of the best I have ever heard. But the reality is that they have many, many stories to tell—we all do. Their challenge is finding them and choosing one to develop. I often assist the “story stuck” by helping them identify a question to kickstart their narrative journeys. The process of identifying the question often leads to important stories they want to tell.

Even banal questions engage us, despite our best efforts to resist them. “Have you ever wondered why you have so many different cleansers under your sink?” an Amway representative might ask. No, I haven’t ever wondered about that. But now I do, even though I would really rather not spend my time thinking about it. Or, “People all over the world are tired of waking up tired after a bad night’s sleep. And do you know what they do?” a mattress company might ask. Despite the fact that you’re sleeping just fine there is some part of you that now wants to know, gosh, what do they do? You can’t help it. This is the power of a question at work. A question is the zig that begs a zag. The content is less relevant than the story’s movement. It is the zigzag motion of the question-response structure

that engages us. All questions wake up the brain. But imagine beginning a story with a truly important question, like, “Who am I?” Or, “How can I build the best robot on the planet that is smart and kind?” Or, “What should real education for the 21st century look like?” Or, “Why do clouds behave the way they do?” Or, “What is the math of a rolling ball?” Or, “Who do I want to be when I grow up?” There is no shortage of important questions to ask.

Bottom line: If you are stuck for a story idea, then start asking questions.

The Eight Levels of Transformation

To me, story events exist to support the transformation of the hero, not the other way around. We are interested not only in what heroes do, but also in what they realize. Both are necessary and important, but we are moved primarily by how story characters change and grow. The difference between action and realization is the difference between food and nutrition. The events are the food, the transformation provides the nutrients.

What does transformation actually look like? I have identified eight levels of transformation that I have distilled from the many stories that have flowed through my life for so many years. The eight levels are not mutually exclusive. They often overlap, travel together and work in tandem to provide different layers to stories and story characters.

The First Level Is Physical or Kinesthetic Transformation. At this level, characters develop a strength or dexterity. Popeye eats spinach and grows muscles. Baby (Jennifer Gray) in *Dirty Dancing* learns how to dance. William Tell learns a few new keystrokes. Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) becomes more adept at wielding his light saber. Frequently, transformations at this level are accompanied by higher order transformations.

Luke Skywalker didn't just learn better moves with his light saber; he also grew in many other ways, too. But keep in mind there are always bad movies that don't rise much above this level.

The Second Level Is Inner Strength Transformation. At this level, characters overcome fears and develop courage. Recall the movie *Gladiator*, in which Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) and Proximo (Oliver Reed) helped Maximus (Russell Crowe) in his effort to restore The Republic. Initially, neither had the courage to help Maximus. Eventually they summoned up the fortitude to do so, at great risk to themselves. As they developed their courage, we felt it with them. We rallied behind them. We imagined ourselves being as courageous as they were.

The Third Level Is Emotional Transformation. At this level, characters mature and think beyond their own needs. Han Solo (Harrison Ford) returns to fight the good fight in *Star Wars*. In *Road Warrior*, Mad Max (Mel Gibson) overcomes his selfishness and returns to the community to aid in its survival. In other words, they mature emotionally and they grow up.

The Fourth Level Is Moral Transformation. At this level characters develop a conscience. We see echoes of this in prior levels of transformation, like inner strength and emotional growth. But growth at this level becomes very powerful when characters make a deliberate moral statement—like Schindler (Liam Neeson) developing his list, or Norma Rae (Sally Field) rallying her fellow workers to organize against inhumane working conditions. One day, in the textile factory in which she and her co-workers slaved away in miserable conditions for miserable pay, Norma Rae started a revolution. She stood up and a union was born. And we stood up with her, convinced of the moral righteousness of her cause.

The Fifth Level Is Psychological Transformation. At this level, characters engage in self-reflective action. That is, characters develop an understanding of themselves through personal insight

and self-awareness. Neo (Keanu Reeves) in *The Matrix* series spends the duration of three movies learning who he really is, particularly in relation to the technological ecosystem in which he finds himself. Through his journey of self-discovery, we also develop an understanding of who we are in relation to the networked, multi-dimensional modern lifestyles we now lead.

The Sixth Level Is Social Transformation. At this level, characters accept new responsibilities with respect to family, community or a group. This happens in two ways. They can shift their attention from a focus on self to a focus on community, or they can shift their allegiance from one community to another as they try to understand where they really belong. There are aspects of previous levels of transformation here, but the focus at this level is negotiating one's relationship with a group. Most of the serial sci-fi dramas that I have watched recently, like *Under the Dome* or *Falling Skies*, feature characters who struggle to understand which social group they truly want to call home, or whether they should simply avoid group affiliation altogether and negotiate life as an individual. As they try to understand whom to trust and which group best represents their ideals and interests, we do as well. Their vacillation provides the kind of story motion that engages us.

The Seventh Level Is Intellectual/Creative Transformation. At this level, story characters solve mysteries and address challenges through education, insight and ingenuity. This describes just about every episode of *Star Trek*. We root for the crew of *The Enterprise* as we adopt their challenges as our own. As they triumph, so do we. At this level, students become heroes of their own learning stories by solving problems, unraveling puzzles and answering questions. Their efforts lead them to new understandings about the world and their roles within it. Creating original work allows them to fully engage in that world. This level translates to personal narrative as well. New understandings and creative approaches to life allow storytellers

to create new stories that can guide their future development.

The Eighth Level Is Spiritual Transformation. At this level, characters experience a profound awakening that changes their entire perspective about life on a deep level. Characters emerge reborn in terms of how they see the world and what is truly important. Larry Durrell (Bill Murray) in *Razor's Edge* undergoes such a transformation. Gandhi (Ben Kingsley), in the eponymous movie, seems to have one spiritual revelation after another, which we experience vicariously with him.

One of the great values of thinking about stories in terms of transformation levels is that it facilitates important conversations among teachers and students, mental health clients and counselors, organizational leaders and team members, and whoever is involved in the story development and telling experience. Another value is that it helps us understand the link between transformation and character motivation. Actors looking for guidance will often ask directors, “What motivates my character here?” Understanding the interplay between motive and narrative provides crucial insight about a story.

At its heart, transformation is about realization. I am forever asking story developers, “What does your character realize?” The R word, as I like to call it. Realization doesn't require characters to announce, “Aha, now I get it!” In fact, that sort of blunt force approach to articulating character transformation usually isn't very effective. It is much better for characters to “show their changes rather than tell them” and to embody them in their actions rather than just talk about them. But they do need to realize something. If they don't, then the story has been for naught.

Documentaries: The Art and Science of Telling a True Story

Documentaries are important to anyone who is interested in telling a true story. Bear in mind that documentaries can never

be completely true or comprehensive in their presentation. They are often told from a particular perspective and are produced within time limits that compel filmmakers to be selective about the materials they include and exclude. However, documentaries represent our attempt in the media world to distinguish reporting from entertainment. As such, they need to be addressed differently than stories that don't claim to be balanced or accurate.

Much of the media that educators want students to create is non-fiction in nature. Therefore, documentaries are important to them as a media genre. Whether we are creating documentaries, or teaching others to do so, it is important to understand that documentary development is a balancing act. On the one hand we want documentaries to use storytelling structures, like the core and the arc, so that they don't become a disengaging lists of events. On the other, we want them to retain their journalistic integrity and not devolve into entertainment. There are different ways to approach this.

One approach to telling a documentary story is simply to allow the overall "mega event" (a war, an uprising, a research study, whatever) to form the story arc, and to use the unfolding incidents within it to provide the rising and falling action. *Frontline* documentaries often use this approach. An alternative is to blend drama and documentaries to produce what some call docudramas or "mockumentaries." *Narcos*, a dramatic documentary about Pablo Escobar, is a compelling example. It follows the activities of two heroes, or, if you prefer, a protagonist and an antagonist: DEA agent Steve Wagner, played by Boyd Holbrook, and his nemesis Pablo Escobar, played by Wagner Moura. Their two quests work in tandem to outline an overall arc of events. The "outside story" is that Wagner is trying to catch Escobar, while Escobar is trying to elude arrest. The "inside story" is that both battle with their personal demons, and grow and change because of their inner

conflicts. We watch both of them evolve in their convictions as they ride the tumultuous zigzag of events. A mockumentary leaves us with a bitter-sweet sense of truth that is more poignant than we experience with typical documentaries. We don't know which parts are journalistically sound and which have been created primarily for entertainment purposes. I will leave an assessment of the value of docudramas, mockumentaries and historical dramatizations up to you.

Another approach to effective documentary presentation is using a narrator to lead the audience through a story, asking the questions that we would ask, and assuming several roles in the process, including storyteller, guide and hero. Morgan Spurlock uses this approach. In his documentary *Supersize Me*, he asks the question, "What would happen if I ate nothing but fast food?" Great question. Although audience members had probably never thought about asking it before, now they are completely focused on answering it. We willingly travel with Spurlock through his many adventures as he seeks the answer to his question so that we can answer what has now become our question. Michael Moore also uses the "narrator as hero" approach. In *Sicko* we travel with him as he explores the question, "Why is healthcare the way it is in America?" His question provides the overall arc for his journey. As he walks through the documentary, his process of discovery leads to answers, which lead to more questions, and so on, zigzagging him, and us, through the story. We remain committed to watching because of the motion it creates. His questions become our questions. We ride the events of the story with him. His transformation becomes ours.

There is another kind of documentary worth mentioning, exemplified by Ron Fricke's *Baraka*. In his work there is none of the conventional narrative we expect to see. Instead, he provides footage of compelling cultural vignettes and breathtaking shots of nature, leaving it up to us to either create a story based on what we see, or make peace with the absence of conventional

storytelling. High concept pieces that require the audience to connect all the dots need to present material that is especially compelling. Fricke does a very effective job. However, not everyone who attempts this genre is as successful.

This is just one kind of story that steps outside the mold. Again, I refer you to the chapter about non-conventional approaches to story in my digital storytelling book.

Resolution: The Third Leg of the Story Core

Resolution does not mean a happy ending. It simply means resolving whatever challenges, obstacles or problems had been established during the course of a story—unless, of course, you are planning a sequel. We all know how we feel at the conclusion of a TV program when we see the message “to be continued next week.” Arrrgh! We hate that. We may understand the audience engagement and the advertising revenue that it generates, but we still hate it. It is quite acceptable to create stories that leave us with questions that linger or that compel us to ask more questions. But specific story events need to be resolved unless an overwhelming artistic or commercial reason exists not to do so. The narrative human wants closure.

I think that’s enough for one presentation. How about showing me one more story arc. Drive that car. Good job! And shall we try to show rising and falling action with the other hand? Okay, probably not. Perhaps it’s too late for that.

Calling All Storytellers

I want to thank you for your kind attention, and leave you with the preamble of my storytelling book, which reads as follows:

I have one word for anyone who wants to tell a story, whether it’s with computers, with pictures scratched in the sand or solely with the language of the body and the sounds of the human voice. Whether it’s the story of a quest to find

one's holy-grail, to find oneself or simply to find a way to tell one's story. Whether it's a long story, a short story or a story that never really ends. Whether it's told on the silver screen, in a circle of one's friends, upon the great virtual stage of the World Wide Web or on a hill in full view of the gathered public. Whether it's a personal story, a universal story, someone else's story or a story that can be understood only by the culture that tells it. Whether it's schoolwork, a work of art, art for work or simply something that has to be said.

Whether it's for you, for your friends, for your community or for those you will never meet. Whether it's a personal journey, a scientific adventure, a fantasy of the mind or a memory collage of one's ancestors. Whether it exists as invisible bits of a digital file, as words on paper, as TV reruns or only as memories in the hearts and minds of elders. Whether it never changes, changes every time it is told or changes so slowly that no one notices. I have one word for anyone who wants to tell a story, and that word is: Welcome.

Thank you, and please, go tell your story.