

CREATING A SIMPLE NARRATIVE

HELPING STUDENTS GET TO THE POINT

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PAPER ABSTRACT: When undergraduate industrial design students cannot see a clear path moving forward, they can default to familiar ideas and struggle to look at a situation with new eyes. A short oral narrative is one tool that helps students make sense of their data and forms a bridge from research to idea generation. In today's design world, where design communication can be as important as the design solutions themselves, not having multiple clear, compelling narratives in short formats can be limiting. This paper will revisit the importance of narratives in design and review a short introductory series of exercises and tools to introduce students to narrative construction.

Keywords: Narrative, Storytelling, Design Synthesis, Industrial Design

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, when presenting a portfolio project to a peer for the first time, a 2nd year undergraduate Industrial Design student commented, “When I presented my project, I finally realized how I actually felt about the project – how I had actually approached it and what I liked about it.” Although the design project took the student six weeks to complete, the portfolio presentation of the project was limited to 15 minutes. In this condensed re-telling of the process and results to a peer, the true essence and impact of the design solution became clear. This is the power of a simple oral narrative.

Similarly, in a group data gathering exercise, 15 students were asked to have 20-minute interviews with 10 people each and bring back 5 quotes from each interview. When sharing their results with each other, the students were immediately overwhelmed with the 750 quotes on the walls. Despite additional class periods spent on digesting and simplifying the observational research, the students struggled to synthesize the raw data into simple narratives to help them move forward from observation to action.

This paper will revisit the importance of the narrative form in design and review a short tool-assisted exercise meant to engage students in short, oral narrative construction and break down their barriers of engagement.

2. IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING

Narrative creation shows up in all aspects of the design process. Good narrative skill helps the designer in their role as *facilitator* - generating short, clear narratives of other people's ideas and conversations (Best, 2010) and tell stories to present and clarify their personal work in portfolio form. This ability to organize, simplify, and clarify, often leads to results that are delightful. Greever goes as far as stating that "communicating about the designs [can often be] more important than the designs themselves (Greever, 2015). Therefore, story and oral narrative are a key part of the designer toolkit.

Nicole Fenton reminds us that:

"Design is a process of articulation. We join together to express an idea in a coherent form. We bring ideas to life. We connect the dots or build bridges for our users. That often means being specific about what a product does, who it's for, why it matters, and how it works. We have to trek through a pile of ambiguity to do this (Fenton, 2017).

Story telling is a core part of a design process centered in empathy. "Stories stimulate parts of the brain that help us understand other people's thoughts and emotions" (Ferrera, 2015). Storytelling builds credibility, unleashes powerful emotions, helps bond teams, gives people a format to talk about things they might not normally talk about, are persuasive, bring attention to people and issues that might normally be ignored, can crystalize an idea or concept, and make order out of chaos (Kelly, 2013).

However, for many design students, storytelling as a formal activity is unfamiliar and awkward.

3. OBSERVED ROADBLOCKS TO BUILDING NARRATIVES

There are observable roadblocks for undergraduate industrial design students as they work to construct and tell simple oral narratives:

3.1 PREDISPOSITION OF STUDENTS

All students work and communicate differently. There are students who work linearly, and students who jump back and forth between the beginning of the process, the end, and everywhere in between. There are students that work from the inside out and those who work from the outside in. Similarly, there are students who are more verbal and tell stories naturally as well as students who find verbal communication difficult and therefore oral narrative creation can be taxing.

3.2 VOCABULARY

Although designers are often associated with VISUAL Languages, Best reminds us of the crucial importance of the language and words that we use to augment that skill:

"Visual Communication involves telling a story, compellingly in words, images, graphics, colours, and text. The language we use, the visual language we create, and the format in which we present our ideas are all enormously influential in how a story is received by an audience, and

whether the story captures interest, gains support and is ultimately accepted, or rejected” (Best, 2010).

In storytelling, especially compact oral narratives, verbal language skills are critical. Many design students are not fluent when it comes to using words, especially *on the fly*. Often, students need to learn new vocabulary when summarizing research/user stories, highlighting product concepts, or re-telling the process and results of a design project during an interview.

3.3 INEXPERIENCE

Students often shy away from something that they are unfamiliar with or have little experience with. Increasingly, if a design activity involves interaction with others (interviews, validation testing, group discussions), students are hesitant to participate and prefer a passive rather than an active role in the process. As storytelling is a very active experience – with a teller AND a listener – experiences where storytelling is required can lead to anxiety and hesitation.

All students, independent of their predisposition and/or experience level regarding storytelling, need work on building vocabulary and gaining experience through practice to increase the brain/mouth connection that allows them to clearly SAY what they are THINKING.

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR CRAFTING AN INTRODUCTORY EXPERIENCE

In the same way that creativity is like a muscle (Kelly, 2013), storytelling can be nurtured and strengthened through effort and experience. The following concepts can be considered when creating a storytelling practice session.

4.1 IMMEDIACY

Seasoned storytellers suggest, “Don’t wait to tell your story” (Dykes, 2016). Pushing students into an *active* experience initiates the process and gives them permission to practice and explore the act of creating stories. Specific in-class time should be dedicated for practice.

4.2 SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Students face some level of anxiety when trying a new skill. Rather than the high stakes of presenting in front of strangers or the whole class, having students engage with their supportive peers - especially in groups of 2 or 3 - can reduce the inherent anxiety of practicing storytelling skills.

4.3 REMOVING COGNITIVE PRESSURE – USING TOOLS

For those who are budding novelists or screenplay writers (i.e., those who have a predisposition and practice in the art of storytelling), there are plenty of *complex* story/plot structures available (Hamilton, 2022). Ready-made structures, formulas, and tools provide an easy entry point for narrative construction. For the beginning storyteller there are much simpler structures that are less intimidating. Using tools helps students know where to start and when their story will be finished. When crafting an

initial experience, a simple, imposed structure allows the emphasis to be on the *act* of telling the story rather than the *process* of constructing the story.

4.4 SMALL DURATION

A conventional proverb states, *by the inch it's a cinch but by the yard it is hard*. Students often push back against an hour-long activity but, in the spirit of the Pomodoro method (Mandal, 2020), are willing to engage in something that only takes 3-5 minutes. Keep exercises short, take a break, repeat.

5. INTRODUCTORY EXPERIENCE

The following section describes an exercise run over multiple cohorts and in different classroom settings as a forced introduction to storytelling in the context of their design experiences.

Keeping in mind the previously described principles, students are paired up with their peers and given a mixed set of 5 commercially available story cubes (Rory's Story Cubes, 2010).



Fig 1 – Story Cubes

5.1 STAGE 1

Students are asked to roll the dice, put them together in a *tight* line, and tell a very small story using only the details that they see in front of them. Using the images in Fig 1 above, a simple narrative might be:

I coughed and a bug came out of my mouth. It might have been from the leftover rice I ate after coming home from work. The cough was so bad I might as well have been handcuffed.

Students then take turns telling similar stories to their partner, directly following the simple chain of prompts. The goal is to have each student tell 3-4 stories each before moving to stage 2.

5.2 STAGE 2

In order to reinforce the concept of telling stories in front of “strangers”, the small, 2-3 person working groups are re-arranged, giving each student a new partner. Students are then asked to repeat the beginning exercise. However, rather than putting the randomized dice together in a tight line, they are

told to *space them out* by some noticeable amount and asked to fill in the physical gaps with additional narrative details that there *wasn't room for* in the first experience. This forces them, in a non-threatening way, to begin to add their own details and cross the threshold from description into personalized story telling. This is repeated so that each partner can tell 3 or 4 stories.

5.3 STAGE 3

Students are then asked to use the plot prompts to tell a story about a real person – perhaps a friend from high school, a family member, or a current roommate. This begins the transition from completely fictional stories to stories linked to real events or people. This points to constructing narratives based on user interview or observational research results. In this stage, the students are surprised at how easy it is to make a connection between a gnome or a princess or a dinosaur and their best friend from high-school or a friend from their neighborhood.

5.4 STAGE 4

Lastly, students are asked to tell *a future story about themselves* using the same limited prompts. In this way, rather than a descriptive story, they are using the prompts in an interpretive and predictive way – similar to using user interview responses and trends to *generate* product concepts and *solution scenarios*. Again, based on the images from Fig 01:

This week If I am not careful, I will be upset and irritated. More than likely, it's not going to be from a single major event, but a series of small things that push me to a breaking point. To head this off, I need to be better at getting simple but regular meals and take time for activities with friends. I've got a lot to do, and NOT getting it done will just get me into trouble, which is a trap I often fall into.

At this point in the exercise, close to 90 minutes have passed and students have had an enjoyable experience even though they were *pushed* into story telling. The various outputs serve as touch points that are referenced in subsequent class periods as students practice their newly discovered storytelling skill in constructing narratives based on user research and their own ideation processes.

6. CONCLUSION

Storytelling is a powerful tool for designers in each step of the design process and is a way to describe, design, decide, entertain, and engage. A single sketch is an idea, but a collection of sketches tells a story. A single interview gathers data, but a collection of interviews is an epic tale. To effectively communicate the impact of this epic tale, a story needs to be structured into characters, plot twists, and a resolution in order to be impactful and useful.

For a variety of reasons, students struggle with the unfamiliar skill of telling short oral stories in a meaningful way. Often, the role of an educator is simply to introduce a topic or skill, provide a small

engaging initial experience, and follow through with continuing opportunities for practice. It is no different for the skill of storytelling.

A series of low-key exercises, leveraging tool generated plot structures, with a building push towards interpretation and prediction seems to provide enough initial success to break down barriers in students related to storytelling. As students continue to build storytelling skills in the context of user research, design concept presentations, or even presenting their own work in an interview, students can intentionally work towards more complex plot structures such as The Connection, Creativity, or the Challenge plotlines (Heath, 2007).

The point being, when students become better at telling stories, they become better designers, and better armed to play a strategic role (Monarth, 2014) wherever they may land.

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