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Our Students, Our Union, Our Future

COM116
Telling Your Local Story for Maximum Impact:
Exploring Digital Storytelling

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Indicate the NEA Strategic Goal and NEA Organizational Priority your session addresses:

• NEA Strategic Goals
  – Strategic Goal 1: Strong Affiliates for Educator Voice and Empowerment
  – Strategic Goal 2: Empowered Educators for Successful Students

• NEA Organizational Priorities
  – Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
  – Institutional Racism/Racial Justice in Education
COMPETENCY: Communication

• Levels:
  – Level 1: Foundational
  – Level 2: Mobilizing & Power Building
  – Level 3: Agenda Driving

• Leadership Competency Themes
  – Develops a two-way strategic communications plan
  – Uses current media, technology, and social networks to communicate
  – Develops communication approach and style to fit appropriate audience
  – Identifies appropriate messenger(s)
A Wider View
Warning: Very Big Numbers

• The *average* American takes in over 74 gigabytes of information per day, and spends **15.6 hours a day** taking in information from some medium.

• (In 2008, this was only **34 gigabytes and 11 hours** per day.)

*USC Institute for Communication Technology Management*
Warning: Very Big Numbers

- Digital media consumption, online and on mobile devices, was at just over 5 hours per day
- This exceeded TV consumption, which was at 4½ hours per day

USC Institute for Communication Technology Management
Warning: Very Big Numbers

- A 2015 study found the average human attention span (8 seconds) is now shorter than that of a goldfish (9 seconds)
Amidst that sea of content, **story** is how we understand & organize.
The Power of Narrative

How do people form opinions?
Think about where you stand on various issues.
Then think about how you came to your position.
The Power of Narrative

Odds are that there are a few issues where you have an opinion that you didn't form by taking in arguments from both sides, weighing carefully who had better evidence and logic, and then carefully choosing where you would stand.
The Power of Narrative

Neuroscience, social science, history, political science—all are coming to the same point:

**Identity shapes opinions.**

First we decide who we are, and *then* we decide what we believe based on that.

The cognitive filter of identity doesn't just control what opinions we have; it controls what facts we'll believe, who we'll listen to and who we'll ignore or reflexively oppose.
So how do we form, shape, and maintain identity?

Narrative.

Our identities are formed by the stories we tell about ourselves.
This isn't a new development... in fact, it's as old as humanity itself.

Humans have always made sense of the world by telling stories about ourselves.
In a way, social returns us to the “original social media” and can be more akin to oral storytelling rather than broadcast media.
Social media promotes two-way conversation, a kind of mutual storytelling and story-forming, rather than telling a complete story in a single broadcast to an “audience.”
But what do we mean by “story”?

What makes a story?
Stories have **form**.

“Form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite.”

-Kenneth Burke
Stories have **form**.

Common forms/tropes include the Hero's Journey, the Underdog Story, the Romantic Comedy.

We are so used to hearing these stories every day, in every media and format, that we know and expect the next step in the narrative.
Stories have **form**.

Example of form: The underdog sports movie.
Stories have form.

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Stories have **form**.

These narrative forms are so powerful and ingrained in our culture that you only need to fill in enough to make it clear what story you're telling.

**Your audience will fill in the rest.**
But form isn’t enough.

The universal quality of archetypal forms is why they are so powerful and potent.

They can be retold, again and again.
But form isn’t enough.

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*
But form isn’t enough.

Campbell identifies an archetypal form of story, the “hero’s journey” ... but that archetypal form doesn’t really do much on its own.

The hero needs more in order to evoke emotion and senses: A face. A personality. A place and time. Companions, a quest, and a villain.
Stories have **characters**.

Heroes. Villains. The down-on-her-luck underdog who really just needs some self-confidence to shine. The entitled jerk who needs to be taken down a peg. The tough guy who is really a softie on the inside. The unappreciated sidekick who saves the day.
Stories have **characters**.

Like narrative forms, these characters also have storylines that are ingrained into our culture.

Tell part of the story, and your audience will fill in the rest.
Stories have **characters**.

Characters are also the main point of **identification** for your audience, and their **entry point** into the world of the story.

Think about which character in the story you want your audience to see **themselves** as.
Stories have **characters**.

Many of the great stories have a **point-of-view character**—someone who is new to the story’s world, whose experiences in this new environment the audience can identify with.
Stories have **characters**.

Think of **Luke Skywalker** in the first *Star Wars* movie. Through him, we are introduced to the heroic rebels, the evil Empire, and the mystery of the Force. We meet most of the other characters when he does. We learn and grow with him.
Stories have **characters**.

If a story doesn’t have a point-of-view character to introduce them to the story’s world—**particularly** if the story has a complex or unfamiliar setting—the audience can feel lost, confused, or disconnected.
Stories have **characters**.

A point-of-view character doesn’t have to be the hero of the story.

Watson is not the hero of the Sherlock Holmes stories, but seeing Holmes through his eyes enables us to connect with an otherwise-alienating character.
Stories have **setting**.

Setting—**time** and **place**—turns the abstract archetype into a **concrete instance**.

It gives the storyteller a space in which to evoke the **senses** and **sensory memories**.

Sensory memories are powerful, and evoke **memory** and **sensation** in the other senses.
Stories have **setting**.

Think of the smell of acrylic paint. Did you just picture your art classroom in school, when you were growing up? (I did.) Describe it to yourself in your head. What do you see there? What do you hear there? What are the textures?
Stories have **setting**.

A well-defined setting in your narrative can evoke these sensory memories, helping your audience **connect** with the narrative and picture **themselves** as part of it.
Telling your story online

As we mentioned earlier, these archetypes can be evoked without having to tell the whole story.

Their power and ubiquity in our culture means that if you’re effectively using them, your audience just has to know which story you’re telling, and they’ll help fill in the rest.
Telling your story online

That means that to tell your story online, you don't have to produce this.
Telling your story online

You can tell enough of the story in 140 characters, a single image, a single animation—or a series of items.

You can use one medium to create the appetite for your audience — and then direct them to another medium to fill that appetite.
Telling your story online

The most effective campaigns—whether for political office or issue advocacy—are built around simple narratives that resonate with these deep cultural reservoirs of story.
Telling your story online

Identify the elements of the narrative:

- **Character**: Who’s the hero? Who’s the villain? Who does your audience identify with?
- **Form**: What is the narrative arc? What story are you telling? How does it end?
- **Setting**: When and where does this story take place? What senses does it evoke?
Telling your story online

Effective story can be a double-edged sword, alienating those who identify with the antagonists in your story.
Telling your story online

The story being told by the Trump campaign was that “coastal liberals” were the villain, attacking the “real Americans” and the nation’s identity.
Telling your story online

That story was potent enough for him to win the Electoral College, but it also turned the majority of Americans against him, particularly educated Americans living in multicultural urban areas.
Telling your story online

At the same time, the vehement opposition of liberals to Donald Trump only reinforced the identity of his supporters: “those coastal liberal elites looking down on us again.”
What does this mean practically?
Think like a storyteller... not a broadcaster.
Storytellers work with their audiences, enlisting them as co-creators in the story. They pay attention to their audiences’ feedback and adjust the story to what they’re receiving.
Ask for feedback & pay attention to engagement metrics.

What are the common threads among the social messages, media, & platforms where your audience is engaging most?
Storytellers engage in dialogue, not monologue.

Storytellers look for ways to bring their audience to identify with the story on an emotional level.
Ask your audience to tell their stories. Amplify them when they do.

Find ways to get resources to your best storytellers & help them tell their own stories.
Every storyteller starts as a story-listener. The great ones never stop.

Storytellers are always looking for new inspiration, new stories to tell, and new ways to tell them.
When you see someone online telling their story particularly well, think about how they did it. How did they use media? How did they bring in their audience? How could you adapt those techniques to your voice?
Storytellers use all the tools at their disposal to tell their stories.

Cave paintings represented a technological breakthrough; so did writing, animation, and developments in language. Storytellers used & adapted them all.
Tell stories visually as well as textually.

Use images, videos, Snapchats. We remember 30% of what we read, but 80% of what we see, and the brain processes images 60 times faster than text.
Storytellers experiment and iterate. They try out new voices, new angles, new details as they retell the story, to keep it fresh & relevant to their audience.
Experiment with new forms of media and new platforms.

Find & cultivate people in your local network who can do high-quality “prosumer” video work, animation, photography.
Storytellers don’t hide their personalities; they cultivate and use them.

A good storyteller knows their own voice, and works to tell the story in a way that is unique to them.
Know your voice, and don’t be paralyzed by the silent critic in your head.

What is your personality? Your organization’s personality? Don’t fight it; use it.
Storytellers know that every story exists in a context of other stories. They can make allusions to archetypal characters or cultural tropes, and trust their audience to fill in the gaps.
Even single tweets or single photos can be part of a larger story.

You don’t need to tell the whole story every time. Tell part of the story and listen as your audience fills in the rest. Sometimes, they’ll give you a new angle.
Example: A Tale of Two Children

A Tale of Two Children: Two Children, Two Zip codes, Two Outcomes. Time for Change.
Where is digital storytelling going next?
Livestreaming

Over the last year or so, livestreaming has become easier & more accessible (Facebook Live, Periscope).

It’s expected to become more elaborate as people continue to use & innovate with it.
Virtual Reality

VR technology has also increased in adoption. At the moment, producing content for VR is still largely out of consumer hands, but that will change quickly as adoption rates rise.
AI & Chatbots

These could be key interfaces for brands & organizations as they continue to evolve.

AI production is likely beyond consumer/prosumer reach at the moment, but will change audience expectations.
Session Outcomes

• The content from this session can be used in the following ways in your current position/role:
  – Improve quality & engagement of online communications
  – Use online communications more effectively to build, cultivate, and organize key audiences
COM116: Telling Your Local Story for Maximum Impact

• Please complete the evaluation for this breakout session!
• Please visit the Leadership Development Resources website at www.nea.org/leadershipdevelopment