

STORYTELLING IS OVERRATED

BY MICHELLE HOWIE

There sure is a lot of hype around storytelling these days.

There has never been so much training and coaching available for people wanting to hone their public speaking, presenting or pitching skills. And we have the neuroscience behind it too. We know that our brains light up like the Eiffel Tower at Christmastime when a good yarn is being spun.





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THE POSSIBILITY THAT WE DO NOT.**

Storytelling is big business now – and undeniably it has a role to play in meaningful learning. So, then why do I think it's overrated?

I'll keep this brief – because brevity is one of my two main points!

GOOD IN THEORY, BAD IN PRACTICE?

Storytelling is overrated because too many of us (myself included!) abuse the narrative craft by:

- being long-winded, unprepared and laborious in our storytelling, and by,
- failing to connect the emotional 'whammy' in our stories that truly ignites the neurological responses needed for deep learning and attention.

SHORT IS SWEET

Firstly, brevity. Please tell shorter stories. Edit yourself. Think about what you want to say – and why you want to say it – before grabbing the microphone.

Many of us believe we tell a good story. The truth is, we need to face the possibility that we do not.

I am fortunate to have a great critic in the household: my husband. He reviews all my writing and he regularly yells, 'get to the point!', when I am recounting a story or an event. My verbal storytelling is waffly, at best. Everyone needs a critical audience when they are in the game of holding forth to a captive audience. Trainers and coaches included!

If it can be said in ten words, why use 35? The art of brevity – to trim and cull words as the story unfolds in real time – well, it's quite the knack. It requires a detachment and a presence to your audience that is mighty hard to master. You need to see the glazed eyes and the squint of confusion and know how to flip things around quickly – without fluster, without ego or pouting. It's tough learning and it requires practice and critique, but if you want to tell stories, it is worthy work to trim your tale!

PACK A PUNCH

Secondly, emotion. You have got to grab people by the heart and make them feel something. Even if your subject matter is sensible corporate training and you're telling a story about a rather good strategic planning exercise you once delivered, make it personal; find the emotional angle.

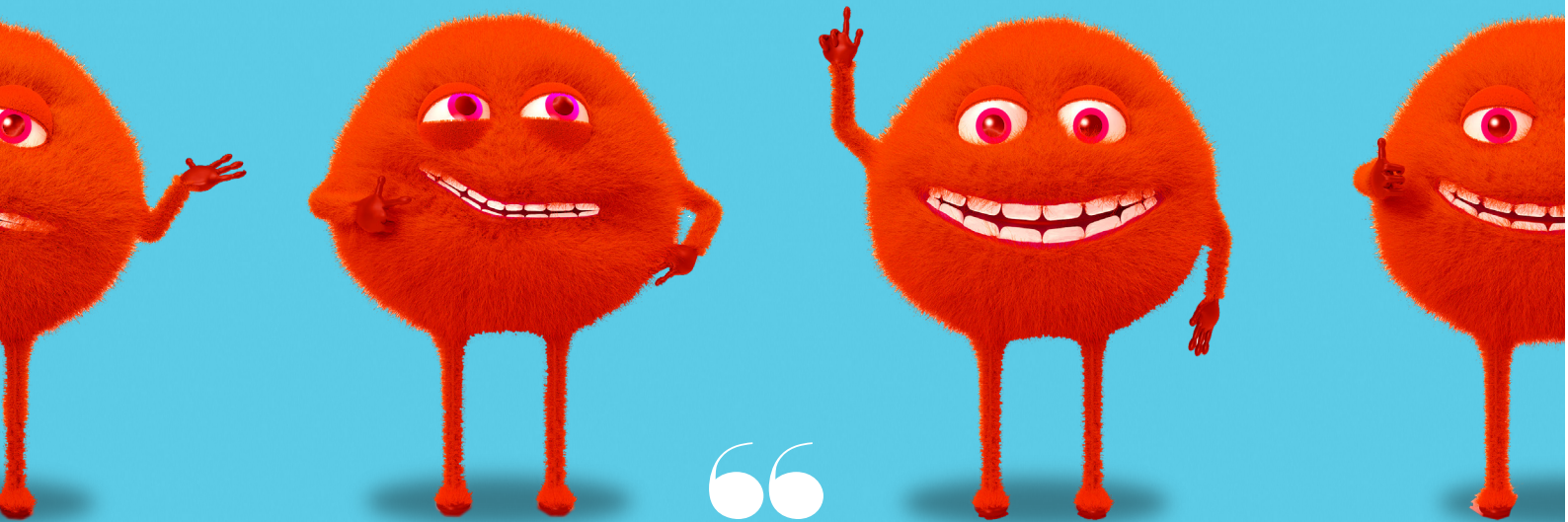
In his book about storytelling, the novelist, E. M. Forster, famously compared two sentences:

1) The king died and then the queen died.

2) The king died and then the queen died of grief.

Sentence one: fact. Sentence two: fact plus relationship, impact, consequence, emotion, curiosity, empathy... Two extra words that create immeasurable difference.

The connection and attention achieved in the second sentence is a vastly more effective primer to hold the audience as you walk further into the story. Notice how it only took two extra words – adding an



WHAT DID THEY SEE, HEAR, FEEL OR THINK?

WHERE IN YOUR STORY CAN YOU WEAVE IN

EMOTIONAL ANGLES THAT MIGHT EMERGE?

emotional whammy to your storytelling does not need to contradict my point about brevity. In fact, it's vital it doesn't!

If you are unsure how to find the 'extra', you might be overlooking the emotional vantage points of either your audience or the other characters in your story. Who else is in this account? What did they see, hear, feel or think? Where in your story can you weave in these added perspectives and any emotional angles that might emerge?

WIN HEARTS AND MINDS

In summary, we all know the feeling of a hearing a story that landed squarely on our emotional fibres, that touched us, moved us and burnt a lasting memory in our minds. We also know the feeling of being bored to tears, wishing we could interject and speed things up, or simply not feeling any connection to the speaker's content. To effectively teach, train, coach, advise and facilitate with our clients, we need more of one and less of the other.

Stories can transport us to a place of the teller's choosing. It's a beautifully artful skill with powerful potential for the lasting transfer of new knowledge and concepts. I only encourage you to go light with your words and find depth with the emotional angle.



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Michelle Howie works with leaders, individuals, and organisations in New Zealand as a consultant and coach. Behind all of Michelle's work is a rock-solid knowing that we are equipped to handle life – and that from this place of knowing, life can be lived with more ease, more laughter, more creativity and lots of practical action! Tapping into who we are and relying on the stuff of which we are made is her favourite coaching angle. Read more at www.michellehowie.com or contact michelle@michellehowie.com