

## A CONCEPTUAL MODEL ON THE USE OF STORIES AS A TOOL FOR TRAINERS FOR BETTER ENGAGEMENT & LEARNING OF THE TRAINEES

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**Abstract:** *It is a fact well known to all researchers and practitioners alike that training has tremendous potential value not only for managers and HR professionals but also for teachers, educationalists and counsellors. This paper explores the possibility of trainers using narratives (as stories) as a tool for raising curiosity & satisfaction for better learning & retention in learners. Published research literature rarely throws light on the biological dimensions of impact of storytelling, particularly the role of brain in regulating curiosity, in the context of training. This paper goes beyond popular literature on training to provide the trainers, counsellors and educators with a model that uses an interdisciplinary understanding of Freytag's Pyramid from English literature and brain theory-based explanation of the neural influences on human emotions from neuro sciences and portrays how this mechanism can affect and influence learning.*

**Keywords:** *storytelling; narrative paradigm; organizational training, retention, learning, curiosity*

### INTRODUCTION

“Story” is a way of knowing and remembering information—a shape or pattern into which information can be arranged. It serves a very basic purpose; it restructures experiences for the purpose of “saving” them. And it is an ancient, perhaps natural order of the mind.... By imposing the structure of a story onto some circumstance or happening, greater coherence and sensibility are achieved within the event itself, and otherwise isolated and disconnected scraps are bound up into something whole and meaningful.”

This paper is based on the proposition put forth by Livo and Rietz in 1986 as above. The understanding of this idea along with the study of structure of story and some neurobiological insights has been used as the basis to propose a model for the trainers for using stories as a tool to raise curiosity amongst the learners and achieve the desired end.

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## NARRATIVE AS A TOOL FOR TRAINERS

Narrative refers to both the story; i.e. what is told, and the means of telling, thus implying both product and process, form and formation, structure and structuration (Potteiger & Purinton 1998). Stories have always been an integral element of the human society and culture. Human thinking is narrative by nature, and human beings make sense of the world by constructing individual stories of it (Bruner, 1990, 1996). Stories are attention-grabbing and well-narrated stories are not only enthralling but also retained better. The revered religious scriptures worldwide like the Mahabharata, Bhagvat Gita, Ramayana, the Bible, or the Quran, or the fables, have fascinated & come down to the present generation through narratives. The visualization and mind pictures created in the process go a long way in leaving a deep imprint on the subconscious mind. Stories can simplify the understanding of some of the most influential processes by their sheer power of layering and connecting those layers into an organic whole. The power of storification can be magnified and implemented into newer horizons for its impending paybacks as far as gripping & impacting human attention is concerned. The idea is based on the premise that human beings are natural story tellers as well as listeners and the end result of storytelling is the impression, the visualization of what to make of the experiences used therein.

The understanding of Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT), developed by Walter Fisher, for experiential learning during training programmes is the base for storification. This theory recognizes human beings as innate storytellers and views human communication in the light of people being active participants as agents (authors) or as audience (co-authors) (Fisher, 1987). This understanding postulates that all forms of human communication are best relayed as stories (Cragan & Shields, 1998).

Human beings use rationality and logic to assess stories as listeners and recreate a reality based on what is presented to them (Cragan & Shields, 1998). This interesting combination of a sender's innate ability to tell stories and the theory's assumption of the receiver's ability to logically evaluate the story's content offers an intriguing opportunity for NPT to be used more regularly in the global business environment to allow a swifter and more effective form of training.

"Stories help us to make sense of what we are, where we come from, and what we want to be" (Soin & Scheytt, 2006, p. 55). The potential of storytelling as a brilliant business tool is being recognized in many organizational areas like in introducing change (Boje, 1991) and change management (Boje, 1991; Kahan, 2006); in highlighting the various ways of communication & its improvisation (Finlay & Hogan, 1995; Jones & LeBaron, 2002; Stutts & Barker, 1999; Wylie, 1998); design management (DeLarge, 2004), leadership (Driscoll & McKee, 2007; Grisham, 2006;

Harris & Barnes, 2005), and organizational learning (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2006), amongst some of them. An Iowa University 2008 research thesis also discusses about the scope of narratives in engineering decision making and pedagogy of engineering education (Dusold, T.C., 2008). Another article discusses how stories were successfully used to impart training to the blue collared workers in occupational safety within mining industry (Cullen, E.T., N/A). Clearly, the areas of application are widening, thereby strengthening the scope for the use of this tool.

## **USE OF STORIES IN TRAINING FOR ENGAGEMENT & BETTER LEARNING**

“Storytelling is a natural way of recounting experience, a practical solution to a fundamental problem in life, creating reasonable order out of experience” (Moen, 2006). Researchers have acknowledged the power of stories as an extremely powerful communication genre. Slater (2002) explains the supremacy stories have over the other means of communication to influence behavior & communicate beliefs, model behavior, teach skills, provide behavioral cues, and simulate consequences of behaviors over time. The extent to which an individual can get engrossed in a story has been well explained by Slater & Rouner who use three terms, viz. Engagement, absorption, and transportation to reflect the listeners’ mental and emotional immersion in a story (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Narrative can be used to engage the audience two fold through reduced counter arguing and aids in increasing cognitive preparation and recall (Green, 2008; Slater, 2002; Slater & Rouner, 2002). It has also been suggested that more and better engagement leads to greater identification with the characters and that engagement depends on elements of plot structure and identification with the characters (Slater, 2002).

During narration, the general pattern is arranging information & ideas in a manner that lends it a structure and a sequence. This creates a context which is the key element of story, which Fisher considered natural means for human beings to comprehend information. Here, the term narrative was defined as the representation of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one or more narrators to one or more narratees (Prince, 2003). An organization has a network of stories, many of which are co-created by members with different interpretations. (Boje, 1995). These constructions which could include opinions, micro-facts, or proto-stories (Gabriel, 2000) can be seen as “representing facts-as-experience rather than facts-as-information” (Gabriel, 1991) and are capable of rousing curiosity and affecting mental states. Upon use of narratives, there starts a bonding between the story teller and the audience whereby they enter into ‘a narrative contract’, an unwritten psychological understanding under which the audience in expectation of a meaningful narrative grants a poetic license to the narrator (Gabriel, 2004).

## FREYTAG'S PYRAMID

Freytag's Pyramid is used in describing the plot or a story structure in terms of five acts. It gives a visual model to show the five main components of the plot. It was developed by Gustav Freytag in 1893, (cited in Griffith, 2006) & describes the dramatic elements or the Five-Acts Structure. These elements are (a) exposition, (b) rising action, (c) climax, (d) return or falling actions, (e) denouement (Freytag, 1900).

Exposition, or the initial part of the narration is the state where the plot establishes the background, setting, the issue or the problem, the characters and the related events in details so that the audience can grasp the essence of it.

Exposition leads to Rising Action, whereby suddenly the pace of the story becomes faster and more actions start to occur leading to climax or the turning point. At this point, audience begins to feel the intensity (Griffith, 2006). In this part, the main subjects might confront with certain problems or obstacles. Timothy Paul Garrand (2001) states that there are three kinds of conflicts that should be noted in a typical narrative structure. These include person versus person, person versus environment and person versus self. The Falling Action is the moment of final suspense in which action starts moving towards resolution and ends with denouement.

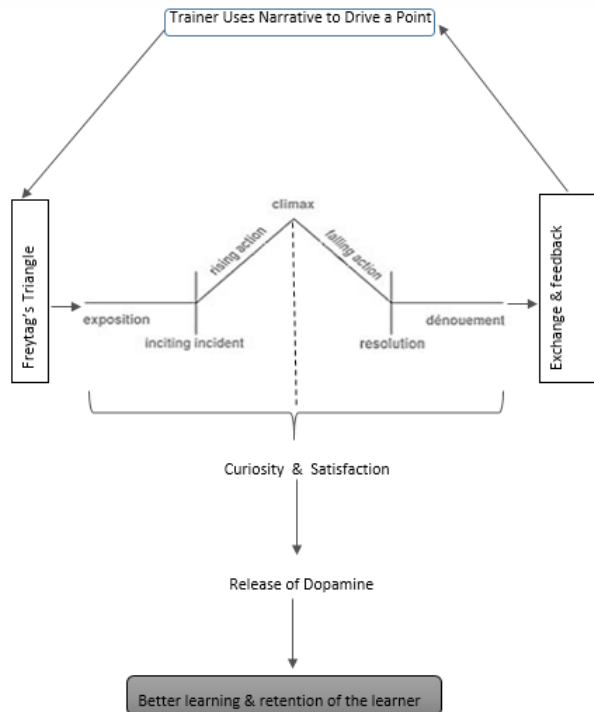
The following model, named "A Trainer's Narrative Model of Delivery & Learning", abbreviated NMDL Model, conceptualized by the researcher, represents two fold ideas:

- (a) an understanding of Freytag's model can help in understanding how to narrate stories well for maximum engagement
- (b) through a well narrated story with an understanding of the rising & falling actions & the climax, a trainer can arouse curiosity amongst the participants for better learning and retention.

The model states that when a trainer uses narration to the best effect, it results in establishing a two way connect with the audience in terms of exchange of ideas & feedback. The understanding of Freytag's model of story structure would assist the trainers in understanding at what point does their narration has the utmost potential to generate curiosity & how to lead the trainees towards that point for maximum engagement and learning. The idea is to let the trainer and the learner enter into a state of neural coupling for a good training outcome. Narratives help people comprehend multifaceted issues and in connecting the rational brain with the emotional brain (Parkin, 2004, Poundsford, 2007; Gold, 1996; Marzec, 2007). The resultant curiosity & satisfaction result in release of dopamine or the DA cells that makes learning more effective (Sample, 2014). Scientific evidence, reviewed

by Schultz (1998), advocates that dopamine cells located in the midbrain play a pivotal role in reward and action learning, as has also been shown through various experiments with fMRI scans. An experiment was conducted by neuroscientists at University of California on a set of students and it was observed that the participants did better at remembering and recollecting answers to the questions they were curious about. The findings further suggested that grades had a role in motivating students but stimulating curiosity works better for learning. Through functional MRI scans, each student's brain was monitored and when the trials for their curiosity to know some answer versus non-curiosity were compared, there was clear evidence of heightened activity (transmission of dopamine signals) which was directly correlated with the element of curiosity (Sample, I. 2014; Gruber, M.,Gelman, B. and Ranganath, C. 2014). Neurobiological research has also captured the brain networks associated with reading stories using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) (Clark. C & Emory, 2013). To avoid making training sessions burdensome, dull and monotonous, Cole in 1997 suggested using stories.

**Figure 1: A Trainer's Narrative Model of Delivery & Learning (NMDL Model)**



## CONCLUSION

“Statistics and regulations are impersonal and uninteresting. Behind every regulation and statistical chart is a good teaching story. These stories can give a face to the impersonal and make it interesting—the people in the stories are just like the listeners, and the listeners understand them. They share a sense of camaraderie and understand that what happened in the story could happen again. Listeners empathize, especially if they are caught up in the story, and they remember the lesson”. (Cole, 1997)

Clearly it emerges that an understanding of usage of stories at the right junctures and the resultant curiosity provides the intrinsic motivation to learn coupled with better engagement & exchange of thought process. A clear win win situation!

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