

Anecdotal Pedagogy: Show Don't Tell

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By Daveena
Tauber

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By Justin Maxwell August 09, 2017

In writing, there's an adage that says, "Show don't tell." The millennial students in my creative-writing classes are immersed in a world that constantly tells them things, and then tells them those things are important. When I walk into our classroom, I am just another voice telling them things.

It's hard to differentiate my voice from the thousands of others talking at them — the 24-hour news cycle, the spam emails, or the Twitter feed of a world leader or a pop star. Faced with such an incomprehensible volume of data, it can be overwhelming to try separating the truly important from the things falsely labeled "important." Detachment becomes a survival strategy.

As a faculty member, you can bemoan that detachment or you can find ways to break through the cacophony. My own solution: Instead of telling students the material matters, I use personal anecdotes to show them why it matters.

Anecdotes are a rhetorical strategy. They augment course material and give it a context that subverts millennial detachment. They are not a panacea. This approach is a rhetorical idiom that simply sits atop the methods you currently employ in the classroom.

The application is straightforward: Tell students about the moment you personally came to care about the concept under discussion, or a moment where it directly intersected with your life. All I need to do is share one instance that shows my own engagement with the material I'm introducing.

Anecdotes don't have to be well-told, just genuine. Students will engage with emotional honesty over smooth delivery. When they see why some subject is worthy of my time, they understand why it's worthy of theirs.

I stumbled onto this approach when in an introductory course on dramatic literature. I was telling my students about costuming — and moving from discussing the role of the costume in a script and on a stage to the politics of the costume itself. That progression set up a larger conversation about the political nature of art and life. Students responded with the same ersatz interest of any other discussion.

So, to expand on an example from our text, I told a brief story about an embarrassing costume choice I had made during my first few weeks of teaching.

I was in my mid-20s and dressing like I had as a graduate student, usually jeans and a sweater. After about two weeks, a polite, well-intentioned student — a Somali refugee in his early 50s — said to me: "You are a very good tutor, but when will our real professor come?"

My costume choice didn't reflect the student's expectation of my role in the classroom. Since I had a large cadre of students — some of whom were indifferent to the formality of my costume and some of whom had strong cultural expectations — I changed my costume. I didn't change it to humor those expectations but because many of the students had layers of culture to navigate.

Putting on Dockers and a button-down cost me nothing but removed one pothole from the rough road many of them traveled. Of course, my wardrobe choice was also shaped by privileges of my race, gender, and sexual orientation, but those factors in the anecdote became part of our discussion about costume in the drama class.

Using anecdotes means that I must frequently check my privilege — an anecdote that appears condescending is counterproductive. My costume anecdote took two or three minutes to tell. I went on to ask students in that drama class what they could deduce about me from my costume choice that day, and they were amazed at the sheer volume of correct answers they could provide.

The connection between myself, the text, and the topic prevented the anecdote from devolving into the trivial. When I asked them to consider what their own costume choices revealed about them, our discussion sprinted into the political.

My costume anecdote underscored the idea we were discussing in class that day, but the material in the text illustrated it, too. The difference was that I had told them about a real moment from my life. Suddenly, their classroom experience wasn't an accumulation of data points but a real thing that happened to a real person in the real world.

They engaged. They stayed engaged for the rest of our political discussion. When we came to the next major concept, I gave them the new material, using text and argument in a rhetorically conventional way. They immediately disengaged. I fell back into my old form, and they fell back into their conventional disengagement. I scrambled for an anecdote, found one, told it, and they reconnected.

I knew students found the class very compelling that day because a few of them came up and said so. More important, in the weeks that followed, some showed me their engagement: A quarter of the students replaced their T-shirts and jeans with serious outfits — they saw the political power of costume and manifested it in their lives. Even those who didn't change their costumes still seemed to understand that the material was worth being passionate about. And because they were in a more dynamic classroom, they learned more overall.

I've used "anecdotal pedagogy" ever since with much the same success. The few times I haven't had a good anecdote of my own to connect to the material, I've borrowed one from someone else.

For example, when I hand out the syllabus at the start of the semester in my classes, we discuss plagiarism. This is a time when students are deep in information overload and, thus, disengaged. So I tell them a quick anecdote: A student bought an essay online and turned it in to one of my colleagues. My colleague told the student that the essay was plagiarized and would result in a failing grade, as per the syllabus. The student vehemently denied it, eventually demanding: "How can you know this essay was plagiarized?" My colleague replied, "Because I wrote it" and went on to cite the journal where it was published.

I tell that story and point out that a website willing to help students cheat is perfectly willing to cheat students. Over the course of the semester I send students back to look at the syllabus many times for many reasons, but I can't remember the last time I did it for plagiarism. That anecdote is 90 seconds well spent. They understand my warning without my needing to label it "important."

Anecdotal pedagogy is an opportunity to connect with disconnected students. It takes very little time, helps facilitate discussion, and connects students to the material. Even the students who aren't inclined toward the material benefit from a "show, don't tell" teaching environment.

Justin Maxwell is an assistant professor of English at the University of New Orleans's Creative Writing Workshop.