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What's Your Best Learning Experience? What Students' Stories Tell Us About Engaging Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Stories help students make sense or meaning out of experience, access prior knowledge, and make connections. Therefore, we start our online courses by having students share their "best learning experience" stories. Through sharing and analyzing each others' stories, our students have discovered that an engaging learning experience is learner-centered, contextual, active, social, and supportive. In this session, we will report on the results of this assignment, presented as a series of case stories. We will focus on what students discovered and the resulting instructional design guidelines that inform their practice. This work contributes to our understanding of student engagement by describing students' discovery of common instructional strategies that, when applied together, have the potential to lead to engaging learning experiences.

Overview

This paper contributes to our understanding of "engaging teaching" by describing the findings of several exploratory case studies of graduate-student cohorts in our *eLearning Design and Implementation* online program. At the start of their program, students (who are teachers in K-12 and postsecondary settings, corporate trainers, and instructional designers) are asked to collaboratively complete a specific course assignment designed to help them enhance their use of instructional and teaching strategies in online courses. Students shared individual stories recounting their experiences of engaging instruction. Then students worked together in small

groups of four to five to mine their collective stories for common themes and attributes that seemed to be at the heart of their engaging learning experiences. Next, all groups shared their story analyses, and as a large group they analyzed their lists of common themes and attributes, compiling a master list of instructional strategies that support student engagement. Finally, students took the master list and developed an assessment tool for evaluating their own teaching and instructional practice. Archiving the results of this activity across several cohorts, we have determined that the students' stories and themes and attributes derived from the stories are consistent. This paper describes the course assignment, the consistent results of the assignment across multiple cohorts, and why the results are useful when considering the design of engaging learning experiences.

The "Best Learning Experience" Activity

For the past few years, we have started our graduate-level *eLearning Design and Implementation* program with the following assignment:

Part 1.

1) Describe your best learning experience. Think about your most valuable, effective, and/or engaging learning experience and in 250-400 words share your learning story. Don't editorialize or try to explain why you think it was your best learning experience, just tell the story.

2) Within your group, analyze each person's "Best Learning Experience" story. Take time to discover why each particular learning experience was so special. This may require you to ask probing questions of each person. The goal of this analysis is to uncover a set of underlying instructional themes and attributes working behind the scenes of these learning experiences.

3) As a group, compile themes and attributes into a list; your list will contribute to providing us with a foundation for the rest of the work we do in this course and beyond. When you design learning experiences for others, it is important to consider what you instructionally value as a learner and educator. Your values—based on your experience in the world and on what you know about how people think and learn (from studying the literature)—should be reflected in your selection of instructional strategies. For example, if you believe that people learn best in collaborative settings, then your instructional design should include opportunities for collaborative learning. See if your values and beliefs are actually reflected in your group's collective stories as you analyze them for common themes and attributes.

Part 2.

Using the story analyses that you did last week in your small groups, work together as a large group to derive a master list of common themes, attributes, and instructional strategies based on your small group lists. Once the master list is completed and vetted,

we will convert the list to an assessment tool we will use to assess our instructional design projects.

We start the program this way because we want students to grapple with the question, "What engages students?" prior to them learning to use the tools and technologies of online teaching and learning. Their responses—which they arrive at through sharing their own learning stories and analyzing the collective stories of their peers—provide a foundation for their study and application of learning and instructional design theories. Besides providing insight into the instructional strategies that lead to engaging learning experiences, students' analysis of their stories helps them study new learning and instructional theories because they are able to tie their new learning to prior experience and knowledge. In addition, because we use the stories as a foundational framework, students have some buy-in for exploring new theories, and embracing the value and relevance of those new theories in relation to their professional practice.

The strength of this activity begins and ends with students' stories. "Recalling and creating stories are key parts of learning. We remember by connecting things with our stories, we create by connecting our stories together in unique and memorable ways…" (Zull, 2002, p. 228). Stories help us make sense or meaning out of experience, with the story form serving as a powerful sense-making tool for educators (Ackerman, Maslin, & Christensen, 1996), in part because they help elicit prior knowledge; stories enable students to access prior knowledge and to make connections "…to larger themes and patterns. Using stories affirms the value of prior student experiences both emotionally and cognitively, help[ing] students make their own meaning…" (Frederick, 2004-2005, p. 1). Related, asking students to share their stories gives them a voice, honoring what they have to contribute to the teaching-learning relationship and building their confidence and sense of empowerment (Burk, 2000; Davis, 2004; Frederick, 2004-2005).

We ask students to engage in formal storytelling because we want them to move beyond the casual exchange of experience and instead participate in critical dialogue. Going beyond simply sharing stories, it is important to "encourage students to look at their stories from different perspectives…[and] ask other members of the class to give their interpretations of the story or try to get the storyteller to scrutinize the assumptions underlying the framing of the story and the tellers' own actions in it" (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999, p. 76-77).

This assignment has led to interesting, unexpected results. The content of their stories—although from different educational contexts, grade levels, and subjects—are surprisingly similar; as students comb through their collective stories in search of commonalities, they uniformly discover that their "best learning experiences" consist of the same five building blocks, and that those building blocks define student engagement.

Findings from Our Review

Recent interest in personal narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1997, 2000) emerged with the rise of critical ethnography and qualitative research (see Polkinghorne, 1988). More than an account of events, narrative is a primary means of making sense of human experience. We employed a case study approach to share an account of our students' insights—via their learning stories—into the characteristics of engaging learning experiences.

First, we reviewed the students' shared stories and discoveries from five cohorts. Below are three examples of "best learning experience" stories shared by students.

Story A

From "Schindler's List" to the smokestacks of Auschwitz, "A Beautiful Life" to documentary footage of thousands upon thousands of soldiers shouting "Heil, Hitler" in unison: even at 16, my Modern History classmates and I were familiar with images of Hitler's Third Reich and the Holocaust. But the human face on the genocide was as remote from us as if it were another planet. How could ordinary people like us have perpetuated this horror? How could they have betrayed their neighbors and friends, sending them to concentration camps and almost certain death? Why were there not more stories like Anne Frank's, of people who defied the regime to help others?

In the third lesson of our unit on Nazi Germany my teacher, Ms Dare, made it all relevant to us without a single word of explanation. She brought in a simple game with tokens and moral questions. To stay "alive" in the game required tokens, and the "winner" was the one with the most tokens at the end. Certain people were designated "White" and others were "Black" – correlating to "ordinary" Germans, and Jews. Each decision required juxtaposing your own personal survival against that of your friends, and it was eye-opening how quickly it became real. Even in a game, conformity and survival were as crucial to us as in real life – the courage we were hoping others would display was laid firmly at our feet, and we were often sadly lacking.

A slightly shell-shocked group of 16-year-olds filed out of the classroom in silence, and never again was the question asked: "How could they let it happen?"

Story B

I had spent many weeks reading books and taking ground school classes that discussed lift, drag, thrust and gravity; how the wing surfaces control the movement of the plane; weather; fuel capacities; maps; landing patterns and regulations; and on and on and on.

But now it was time to take my first flight. Mel, my instructor, walked me around the airplane, checking the fuel levels and the oil, looking inside the pitot tube for insects, checking the radio and other electronics to be sure that the plane was ready for flight.

I prepared to climb into the passenger seat, but Mel said, "no, it's your plane now, you have to fly it."

After buckling ourselves in, I started the engine and took the controls in my hands. Suddenly, everything I had learned seemed to disappear from my head!

But as we started the takeoff roll, I realized that I knew what to do next! I watched for the right ground speed and pulled back on the wheel. We were up! We were airborne!

All of those pieces that I worked so hard to memorize now began to make sense. I could feel the plane sway as I pushed on the pedals that worked the rudder. The plane began to bank as I turned the wheel. Push the wheel away and the plane started down, pull back and we went up.

Story C

When I think about my most memorable learning experience, I have to go back some 20 odd years to Tarrant County Junior College. I had to take some general education courses, one of which was American History.

I wasn't really looking forward to this class despite the fact that I am a history buff. I love reading historical books, watching the History Channel, and discussing history. But I absolutely hate take the classes. I suppose it's because of my experiences in middle and high school.

Back then, history was just a long list of names, places, and dates. It seemed that we spent so much time memorizing the same that the significance of those events was lost. Coupled with that is my incessant need to ask "why" and "how". I've never been much of one to accept things "because someone told me so." I need to have proof, a reason to attach significance to a fact, and understanding on why I need to know or apply information. As I went to Catholic school throughout my K-12 years you can imagine that my "attitude" (as it was so affectionately called by the priests) got me into trouble sometimes -- especially in theology class!

Anyway, here I was at the junior college taking yet another history course. I was fully prepared to be bombarded with facts and expected to soak them up like a sponge. I was not enthused. I couldn't have been more wrong.

The first day of class, our instructor said, "All right, everyone loves history class, right?" You could have heard the collective groan.

He then said, "I want you to forget everything you experienced before and start looking at history in a new way. I don't care if you know the exact date of the events we're going discuss. I'm not interested in whether or not you remember all the players or even the city in which these things happened. As long as you know the correct time frame, location, and key players you are in good shape."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. All class discussions, papers, and projects centered on why an event came around and how it impacted or brought about subsequent events. We discussed how those events affected us today. For the first time the Stamp Act, Monroe Doctrine, Missouri Compromise, Tammany Hall scandals, and Sherman Antitrust Act had real meaning and significance.

The key to the whole thing was our instructor having us think about the events of American History rather than just know them. He talked with us rather than at us. That class not only made taking a history course fun and enjoyable, it also helped shape my future (though I didn't know I would be doing it one day) teaching style. When I first became an instructor back in 1989 and was going through instructor training, I thought back to all the teachers and instructors that I had over the years. When my reflection on each one of these men and women had ended, I realized that I wanted to teach just like Mr. Cowin.

Then, we reviewed the lists of common themes and attributes of engaging learning experiences students created as a result of the analysis of their collective “best learning experience” stories. See Appendix for two examples of lists generated by students.

Through our review of the archived results of the course assignment, we rediscovered what we already knew from experiencing firsthand this assignment with several cohorts: the “best learning experience” stories provide students with a deeper understanding of the attributes of engaging teaching practices and an appreciation for the teaching strategies used to create engaging—and, therefore, memorable—learning experiences for students. We also verified the consistency of these results in terms of student-derived characteristics of and best practices for creating engaging learning experiences based on their analysis of the collective stories across cohorts.

Significance of Findings

A case study approach was selected in an effort to represent the students' experiences in gaining rich and meaningful insights into the characteristics of engaging learning experiences. Students' stories about their "best learning experience" allowed them to capture what effective teaching and instructional strategies are and describe how effective teaching and instruction is experienced by students.

Through their sharing and analysis, our students discovered that an engaging learning experience is learner-centered, contextual, active, social, and supportive. However, students have also determined that simply attending to those common themes and attributes may not lead to an engaging learning experience. They realized that their "best learning experiences" are comprised of happenings/occurrences that reflect both an episodic uniqueness and a structured order, much like a story itself. There is an ineffable qualitative character that is enjoyed, providing the basis for experienced value and aesthetic appreciation, as noted in the sample stories.

This work contributes to our understanding of student engagement by describing students' discovery of common themes and attributes that, when applied in unison, have the potential to lead to engaging learning experiences. Collectively, the stories enable a deeper understanding and appreciation of engaging teaching and instructional practices, and students' new-found awareness of "best learning experience" strategies may empower them to confidently apply those strategies to their own subsequent practice.

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Appendix

Examples of student-generated lists of common themes and attributes of engaging learning experiences

Example A

Learner-centered
Learning activities: are relevant, meaningful, personal, and motivating; require learners to be self-directed, autonomous, intentional, and metacognitively aware; and develop lifelong learning skills and disposition.

Educators: facilitate and guide learning; support students in taking ownership and control over their learning; help students with prior knowledge activation, goal setting, action planning, and reflection; and are culturally-responsive, honoring diversity.

Learning environments include: flexible physical structures, access to a variety of resources, and tools and rubrics that encourage self-assessment and process/goal-achievement monitoring.

Contextual
Learning activities are: authentic, real world, challenging, relevant, context-specific, complex, ill-structured, project-based, problem-based, enculturation, situated, and anchored.

Educators are: focused on professional preparation, and attentive to the development of students' confidence and self-efficacy to participate in the professional community of practice.

Learning environments include: simulations, immersion, problems, projects, case studies, service, communities of practice, enculturation.

Active
Learning activities: are hands-on, generative, dynamic, exploratory, experiential, engaging; involve students in inquiry, discovery, problem solving, decision making, and expression; and culminate in the creation and building of products, or a performance.

Educators: provide opportunities for questioning, knowledge building, practice, and experimentation; conduct demonstrations; model performance; and engage in think-alouds.

Learning environments include: materials, labs, simulations, case studies, role-playing, and projects.

Social
Learning activities involve: collaboration, teamwork, cooperation, discourse, discussion, negotiation, debate, conversation, communication, sharing, storytelling, reciprocal teaching, peer mentoring, peer review, and co-creation.

Educators: establish teacher and social presence, participate, facilitate discussions and community building, provide coaching and mentoring, and cultivate the social context.

Learning environments include: space for collaboration, communication and collaboration tools, rubrics that encourage balanced voices and contributions, and access to external communities.

Supportive
Learning activities are: culturally responsive, differentiated, fun, entertaining, and scaffolded.

Educators: are humanistic, caring, non-judgmental, competent, credible, well-organized, passionate, inspirational, enthusiastic, and attentive; minimize frustration; provide clear and complete directions/information, constructive feedback, coaching, and mentoring; and honor diversity and creativity.

Learning environments are: safe, non-threatening, celebratory, accommodating, flexible, equitable, resource rich, and multimodal.

Example B

Theme = Learner-centered

Attributes	**Instructional Strategies**
Provide opportunities for learners to attach personal meaning to content and activities.	Discuss (synchronous or asynchronous) what learners expect to get from the course and what they have to give to the others Discuss course objectives and expectations and clarify how those expectations will (or will not) be met by the course Reflection questions so learners can consider what they have learned. Apply knowledge gained from content to a personal situation. Role-play situations to practice real-life situations and apply course content in dealing with the situation and one another. Build job aids, lessons learned, checklists, frequently asked questions (FAQ) reference pages, or presentations
Provide encouragement and feedback.	Feedback on work from other learners and instructor. Formal and informal feedback through discussion forum, emails, chat, other. Resources for self-assessment.
Create opportunities to address different learning needs and styles.	Instructor demonstrations of key ideas and use of graphics to supplement text for visual learners. Oral instructions/ lectures for auditory learners. Roleplays and making lists for kinesthetic learners. Multiple modalities for presentation and assessment. Opportunities to adapt/modify assignments.
Create learning experiences that are relevant	Simulations, collaboration, research, documentation of problem-solving processes to be compared to other students and experts
Encourage learners to share their ideas, opinions, and experiences.	Discussions requiring students to post original thoughts or ideas and respond to other students' thoughts/ideas in a constructive and thoughtful manner.

	Provide collaboration opportunities in which each student has a clear role and set of responsibilities. Debate around sensitive issues with clear rules and guidelines. Brainstorming sessions in small groups to encourage students to share ideas and refine their own.
Create situations where learners are responsible for their learning; where they are not simply checking off assignments but are actively involved in discovering and learning.	Action plans for gaining knowledge and skills Research projects Discussion groups of learners (sync or async) Independent work to achieve an instructional goal Providing resources and learning objectives, then allowing learners to select way to meet those objectives
Treat learners with respect, providing motivation and support, respecting diversity of thought, and building learner self-confidence and self-efficacy.	Threaded discussion boards, which the instructor participates in, or merely monitors and provides encouraging comments and hints as needed.
Provide opportunities for learners to assess their learning and compare it to their learning goals.	Dates and deadlines Quizzes, tests, self-assessments, feedback from other learners and from instructors, grades
Provide a variety of resources to support students learning needs and strategies.	Have students take an online quiz to see what learning strategies, needs, and preferences they have. Help them translate that information into action that will help them be effective in their work.
Let students select the form and format they wish to use to express and publish their work (e.g., essays, music, images, stories).	Encourage students to use a variety of methods and technologies (e.g., Web pages, digital video, printable documents, presentations/slideshows) to present their work. Provide assessment criteria based on content not format.

Theme = Social and Supportive

Attributes	**Instructional strategies**
Provide learners experience with peer review of their work.	Students evaluate each other's materials/products. Criteria for review can be provided or developed by students. Organize students into teams and having them review each other while working on a project.
Establish teams for collaboration.	Break up the class into teams and work with each team. Each team can work on different projects or each team can work on the same project, taking its own approach. Encourage learners to negotiate rules of engagement. Teams determine how they will work together: who will work on what, what role will each person take on, what will the team do if someone doesn't meet the obligation, etc. Provide separate discussion forums with communication, collaboration, and document sharing tools for each team so they have a private work area. Collaborate to produce a group product; for example they may produce a written paper, or work together to solve a problem as shown in the example URLs.
Provide compelling opportunities for discussion, negotiation, and debate.	Discuss concepts and content of a course to understand and clarify opinions. Dialog can be asynchronous or synchronous, using discussion boards, chat, email, electronic whiteboards conference calls, or can take place in person.
When desired learning outcomes include complex skills, provide case studies or other realistic scenarios so learners can practice the full complexity.	Analyze an event, process, or system and post preliminary thoughts to a discussion group for a critique. Deduce principles about how to handle similar cases in the future. (See Horton's flow chart on page 227).
Provide opportunities that increase social presence, and personal meaning.	Share relevant personal experiences that create community and share information and experience that connect to learning content. Create "social" environment to learn about each other and share to develop a community among online classmates; for example, use an icebreaker to help students learn to project "social

	presence." Provide a place for students to publish pictures and biographies to break down the distance factor among students.
Have learners critique each other's work and use feedback to improve their drafts.	Complete exercises that teach how to give and receive feedback. Peer review and edit documents, websites, and projects.
Create community knowledge base.	Establish and contribute to an online collection of resources.
Encourage different opinions and perspectives.	Share, discuss, and debate or challenge opinions and thoughts in synchronous and asynchronous formats Use webcasts where instructor acts as mediator and posts thought-provoking questions to students to stimulate ideas and exercise critical thinking skills.

Theme = Contextual and Active

Encourage the use of the actual tools and resources used by professionals in the community of practice.	Create scenarios based on existing problems and projects. Have students share their workplace problems or projects for the group to work on. Connect students to existing communities of practice.
Provide opportunities for learners to work with practitioners and clients.	Collaborate on projects in collaborative workspaces, interviewing and working with distant clients/SMEs on projects.
Provide opportunities for learners to work with target audiences.	Collaborate on projects in collaborative workspaces, interviewing and working with target audiences on projects.
Present activities and project which Include the natural complexity, messiness, and ill structuredness inherent in actual problems of practice.	Problem based Role playing Simulation Provide support/scaffolding for working on authentically complex projects, such as probing questions to focus attention,

	tips, expert hints, etc.
Provide opportunities for hands-on practice and application.	Instructor provides task(s) and detailed instructions Learners perform the procedure or task, step-by-step. Learner completes a performance check (if necessary) to determine if learners are applying/learning the tasks If necessary additional tasks will be repeated by the learners
Encourage the investigation of various expert and practitioner perspectives and roles.	Guided research by learners investigating subject matter Scavenger hunts that are prepared by the instructor on the topic and learners are then required to search for the answers Case study is presented by the instructor that has learners read the case, provide feedback and insight, possibly include a group discussion on the study Hands-on activity Collaboration
Provide learning activities that simulate real life.	Students represent their learning through products and solutions that can be used in authentic situations — their lives and jobs. Use interactive step-by-step web based modeling of the activity. Require step-by-step reaction from the learner, much like a game. Virtual laboratories Simulations
Enable participants to share work, allowing for review and team work on projects among peers, or learners and instructors, or even test groups and beta clients.	Hands-on activity Learners post not-quite-final projects to a threaded chat discussion for review and comments by classmates. “Track edits” and “Comments” functionality in Microsoft Word. Documents go back and forth between leaner groups or learner to beta client for review.

	Presentations followed by feedback surveys Media sharing technology – assist in team work and reviews
Engage learners in provocative discussion and stimulate the creation of new ideas.	Brainstorming Guided Analysis Role Playing. Students arguing from a position that forces others to defend/ deny a position or concept. Debate Team Design Activity.
Encourage learners to demonstrate their ability to define, critically analyze, replicate, and apply course core competencies as defined by the course objectives.	Online exams Completion of projects Papers Presentations Oral exams-online through IM. Compilation of chapter/ weekly assignments into a cohesive product. Group exercises Completion of online labs, games, and research assignments.
Help learners develop, practice, and model skills.	Stimulating, interesting Role playing by webcast or threaded discussion, learners are active and engaged Performance based assessment Instructors and learners use demonstrations and modeling to build learner knowledge Coaching / immediate feedback Case studies Self-paced tutorials