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## The Art of Storytelling

16–21 minutes

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Mara was 10 years old when we first met her. She showed us the picture of her mother she carried with her. Each day, when she woke up, she tucked that photo safely inside her pocket and, on the way to school, told herself the few stories she remembered about her and her mother "to keep myself company." Mara's mother had died a few years before, and Mara held tightly to these stories as an artifact of her mom's caring and their loving relationship. Holding onto these stories helped Mara get ready for and manage the independent parts of her school learning journey.

We met Mara when we worked with her as part of our work with LitWorld—an organization Pam founded in 2007 that connects young people to stories and amplifies their voices. We talked with her about how stories can accompany a person as they do hard things. Learning more about Mara from the stories she shared also helped us tailor instruction for her. We believe all teachers can teach their students to hold tightly to meaningful personal stories to sustain them in times of uncertainty, as Mara did. And we believe teachers can help students use their stories to power their independent learning.

### A Cornerstone of Independent Learning

In the past few years, teachers have had to rethink their approach to student engagement and motivation and recognize the importance of student self-direction in advancing learning. Seeing the impact of remote learning setups during lockdowns, many teachers understood more profoundly that a cornerstone of helping students take ownership of their learning is to amplify their voices and stories. With remote learning, teachers got a glimpse into the lives of their students, and the idea of student stories suddenly felt more poignant and powerful. Asking for students' stories felt more relevant.

We see the work of self-directed learning as involving a triad of self, community, and world. When we help students realize they have the knowledge and capacity to share their unique life experiences, they begin to learn more confidently and autonomously. This is the work of *self*. As they tune into their own experiences and stories, students often become motivated to contribute to their *community*. And teachers can help young people see that every word they write, every moment they make an effort to put their ideas out there, has the power to change the *world*.

When we unlock the stories our students want to share—and free their unique voices to tell those stories—they become intrinsically motivated to learn and apply what they learn. We've seen how teaching students to tell their own stories can dissolve writing anxieties and resistance. Students who previously didn't see themselves as writers fly through notebook after notebook, filling every corner with their thoughts. We've seen kids who lamented they didn't have anything to say grasp onto the story framework and start to write independently, across subjects and contexts, at school and at home, and for life.

Educators can use the power of stories to create environments that release students to do their own work, then bring them back together with their learning community, stronger because of that work. We've found that five practices help harness the power of students' stories to fuel self-directed learning.

## 1. Give Students a Sense of Belonging

To go out into the world—or into a block of independent work—and thrive, students need a supportive community as a foundation. Think of it like a Sunday night family dinner where family members—each with different jobs or schools, situations, hopes, and dreams—come together to share their successes, worries, and goals for the coming week. At the dining room table, the family unit encourages and strengthens each individual to embrace the next week and push themselves. In our schools and classrooms, we can similarly deepen students' sense of belonging to spark their courage in expressing their ideas, so they can learn boldly and confidently on their own.

In our LitCamp program, every day begins with an opening campfire and ends with a closing campfire, with self-directed work tucked in between these two rituals of coming together. This format is intentionally designed to help students recognize they are part of a community that has their back, with whom they can share challenges and successes at the end of the day. We've seen that these rituals matter. They give students the courage to learn independently. To foster lifelong, self-starting learners, we need to create sharing rituals like these in our classrooms.

## 2. Center Students' Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Students from different backgrounds will have different ways of learning independently. So learn about your students and their families, including the cultural and linguistic distinctions that make them who they are. Create ways for adults in your school community to learn about your students more deeply with practices like creating hallway "vision boards" where students are invited to share what they wish for this coming year; displaying hand-drawn family portraits on the walls of the hallways; or making space for their stories with an "open mic" during assemblies or advisory periods. You might have "Name Days" where students carry an index card in their pocket with a story about their name or the genesis of their name—and all day share these little stories with others.



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Language itself is a big part of a student's identity and culture. A healthy storytelling community centers diverse

languages and encourages students to sometimes write and tell stories in their home languages, even as they learn English. Learning the sound of different languages, seeing them written and featured in the room, is good for all students and helps emerging bilingual youth recognize their linguistic diversity as a strength and source of pride. For these young people, hearing positive stories about people like them, involving cultures they identify with, can be transformational. Centering diverse stories creates a more equitable plane, contributes to intercultural understanding, and helps humanize the faces of those we don't know, from cultures we don't know.

Rudine Sims Bishop describes how literature can serve as windows, sliding glass doors, and mirrors. Books can be windows, offering views of unfamiliar worlds. Readers can then treat these windows as doors by walking through them and "into" the world created by the author. Other books can serve as mirrors, reflecting the readers' lives and experiences back to them. Let's prioritize making culturally responsive "mirror-and-window" libraries, conversations, and learning activities in our schools. The self-directed learner is only self-directed when the *self* is included in the curriculum.

Asking students to tell their own stories is a core step in this process. It reminds every student that they belong to the world of reading and writing. Treasure and celebrate students' stories. You might send them home to families in beautiful folders, frame them in the classroom, or have students "gift" each other their own stories in some way. When we pair students up to tell their stories to one another in LitCamp programs, we see how powerful this practice can be. We ask each student to retell their partner's story back to them. We see a look of delight and intentness on the face of each listener as they realize how deeply their partner has been listening to them.

At a math summer school program we have created for school districts that centers the power of story, each day of learning is accompanied by reading and learning about the experiences of a "math hero," one of 15 diverse individuals who used or uses math to change the world. We have personalized the math experience by illuminating the stories of architects, engineers, astronauts, and more. We want all campers to see the potential they have to become world-changing innovators by using math, and to see themselves as having math in their lives by telling and sharing math stories. This story-based work has lifted the level of student practice as students begin to see numbers and formulas through the lens of human interest. And we've noticed that when they do independent work, they are stronger and more resilient, possibly remembering what they've learned about the resilience of these math heroes.

### 3. Publicly Value Stories

Asking students to tell their stories communicates that you, an influential adult in their life, believe they have something to say, something to add to the classroom community and even the world. When students tell you about their ideas, take notes on their words. Give them opportunities to share their thoughts with the class and celebrate their small or large victories. Publicly valuing their ideas combats the anxiety, loneliness, and low confidence that can pose barriers to students thriving independently.

We must also affirm the work a student is doing—not just the product, but also the journey. This prepares students for working persistently on their own. We help them see there's value in the process, not only in the finished product. Teachers might do a regular weekly check-in with each student to communicate some acknowledgement of their progress, such as "I noticed that you pushed through the hard parts of the writing to tell your story" or "You seemed freer yesterday in how you shared your story with a partner." This practice signals to students that we're with them along this journey and we will hold them accountable for their learning. Students will feel known and supported even as they work on a project alone.

Students must get the message that their stories are valued not just from their teacher, but also from the principal and on up to the superintendent. Consider whether your school or district shows that it values and celebrates people's experiences. The walls of your school should reflect actual human stories, not only academic content and achievement.

#### 4. Integrate Story Across Subject Areas

Writing instruction doesn't have to be held hostage in a literacy or English block; it should find its way into science and math, social studies, arts classes, and even physical education. Foundational writing skills are crucial across the curriculum. Mathematicians must write explanations of new theories, scientists defend their discoveries in writing, historians research and write their interpretations, and family members sometimes communicate their feelings in writing. Literacy skills build these aptitudes—and working with stories builds literacy skills.

We can increase students' writing and communication skills as scientists, historians, technologists, mathematicians, friends, etc., by including story in instruction and learning activities. This is important because often when students struggle to work on a project alone, it's not the content getting in the way, but their difficulty with expressing themselves, transitioning the knowledge in their minds into something written or spoken. Fifteen to twenty minutes of instructional writing time built into a lesson in any discipline can spark even resistant self-starters if students get to choose what they'd like to write about—as long as it relates to the content. You might invite students to respond to any of these four prompts, in a way that somehow connects to the content being taught:

- I wonder ...
- I imagine ...
- I remember ...
- I observe ...

These prompts are not necessarily designed to lead to full-fledged personal stories, but to build student "muscles" for storytelling. Students' responses can be snippets shared in student partnerships, or small writing pieces featured on a shared drive or on classroom walls. These prompts are designed to help students see that their ideas are valuable, to begin to connect what they are learning to who they are. In a history class, a student might wonder about the private life of a historical figure. In math, a student may consider the ways the lesson on geometry could apply to a previous lesson on algebra or the ways it might be used to design a new type of building. These quick writes can be a few sentences or paragraphs or, if we want to push our students' thinking, we could ask them to write in longer form, perhaps to imagine a conversation between two philosophers or artists.

Take the last 10 minutes of this exercise to discuss things like grammar and punctuation, pointing out that attending to these helps students strengthen their writing. Literary mechanics will take on a new meaning when worked on in relation to a student's own story.

Once we position our students as storytellers, they will begin to look at the texts they read and write differently, through the lens of story. We can ask them: "How is this writer telling a story?" rather than "How is this writer using an adjective?" The adjective is, of course, important, but if we help our students consume stories with the driving concern of the storyteller, we will better unlock the *purpose* of that adjective. When students look at text through this lens of narrative, we can jump beyond just the tactics of writing into the life-changing—sometimes lifesaving—purpose of writing. And when students see the "why," they become more motivated to grasp the "how," and self-motivated learning happens.

#### 5. Expand the Audience

Students' personal stories, especially, are often the spark that keeps them ambitious, engaged, and working autonomously. Frequently, however, students (and adults) don't think of themselves as having stories worthy of sharing. It's not always intuitive to see your life as story-worthy. We need to shift students' conceptualization of a "story" from something that exists in a book or on the news to something anyone can have or tell.

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Create time and space—in the classroom and occasionally schoolwide—for students to share funny or powerful moments from their day or their life. Sure, you can put an A on a student's paper, but that's not as powerful as 15 or more people listening to or reading that student's work with rapt attention. In a community of belonging, you don't just tell people they are worthy, you put them in situations where that's obvious to them—and storytelling is one of those places. Asking students to tell their story communicates that they have the talent to be a storyteller and experiences worthy of telling, and that they have something to offer their community. When we ensure students of these truths, they start to thrive independently.

### **Reading Others' Stories**

We've found in our LitWorld work that reading particular stories can be as healing and empowering as telling stories. One student we worked with, Daniel, had been in many foster homes and had never found comfort in reading—until he heard the Harry Potter books read aloud. Daniel told us this was the first time he had met a character like himself. "Harry Potter has a scar on his forehead," he elaborated, "but I have a scar on my heart. Me and Harry, we have courage." Reading a poetry collection by Langston Hughes, *The Dream Keeper*, another student, Esme, wrote, "These poems are like a memoir because they tell me what Langston Hughes is wishing for. I want to write my own."

We created LitWorld in service to connections like this, to helping kids like Daniel and Esme find respite from loneliness and sorrow by telling their stories *and* by seeing that characters they read about also face seemingly insurmountable challenges, yet in all of this, still find hope. Daniel realized that, like Harry, his pain and wounds could be part of what make him strong. Part of that hope is found in story itself, in being able to share something about yourself, your culture, or your language—being seen, being heard, becoming known.

We've also seen students in the LitWorld LitClubs in Detroit read about children in Flint, Michigan, not having clean water and feel called to raise their voices to protest this issue. LitClub members collected bottles of clean water to bring to their peers in Flint. They were empowered to initiate action, and they worked independently and together to support other young people.



## A Life-Changing Shift

When educators start valuing and championing students as storytellers within a community, it can be life-changing for students. They begin to see themselves on a continuum from self to community to world through writing, telling, and reading stories. Students begin to feel visible in the world, not only through telling their own life experiences, but also through listening deeply to others' stories. They become confident, self-directed learners, ready to journey forth with those stories tucked inside, to contribute to shaping a new world.

### Reflect & Discuss

- How might you incorporate elements of students telling their own stories—or any story—into the content you teach or learning activities?
- Do you agree that helping students to tell their own stories motivates them and fuels independent learning? If so, why?
- Does your school or district do enough to encourage students to write "across the curriculum"? If no, why not?

### Tell Your Story

Learn how to increase students' skills as writers and storytellers with an innovative, inclusive, and empowering framework for teaching writing that centers student voice.



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